MARVEL

PARADISE X®

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PARADISE X

Collecting Paradise X issues 6-12, Devils, Ragnarok, A & X

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Previously...

Old heroes never die...

The Earth has been saved from the Celestial embryo that was growing within it. And Death herself has been slain in the collecting pool of souls known as the Realm of the Dead. All those champions and heroes who have perished have now been set free, while a still living humanity no longer has any fear of its own mortality.

Things have never been so bad for the Marvel Universe.

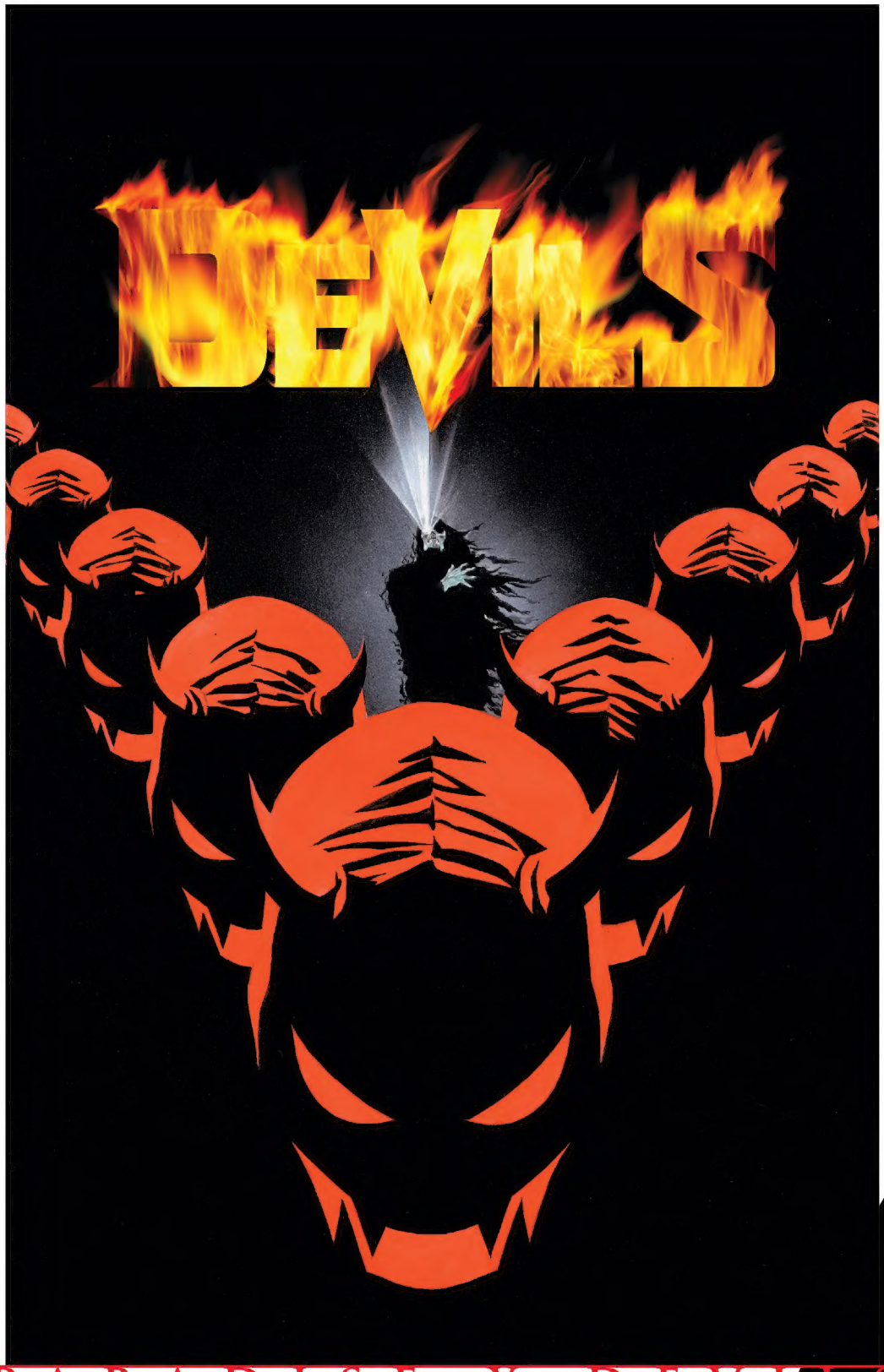
On Earth, Reed Richards' Human Torches have failed, the very devices intended to burn the atmosphere of the mists that mutated all of mankind. Humanity desires its mutations. In addition to its intoxication with power, a terrible discovery has been made – no one is dying. Those, who through terrible violence or old age (caused in many cases by Mephisto) might have died and gone off to the artificial heaven, are stuck on Earth, suffering for all time.

And in the "Paradise" Captain Mar-Vell built and established as a new residence for those set free from the Realm of the Dead, there is a growing suspicion of his motives and reason for forging it. As new souls join its ranks, it expands, swallowing living worlds and peoples whole.

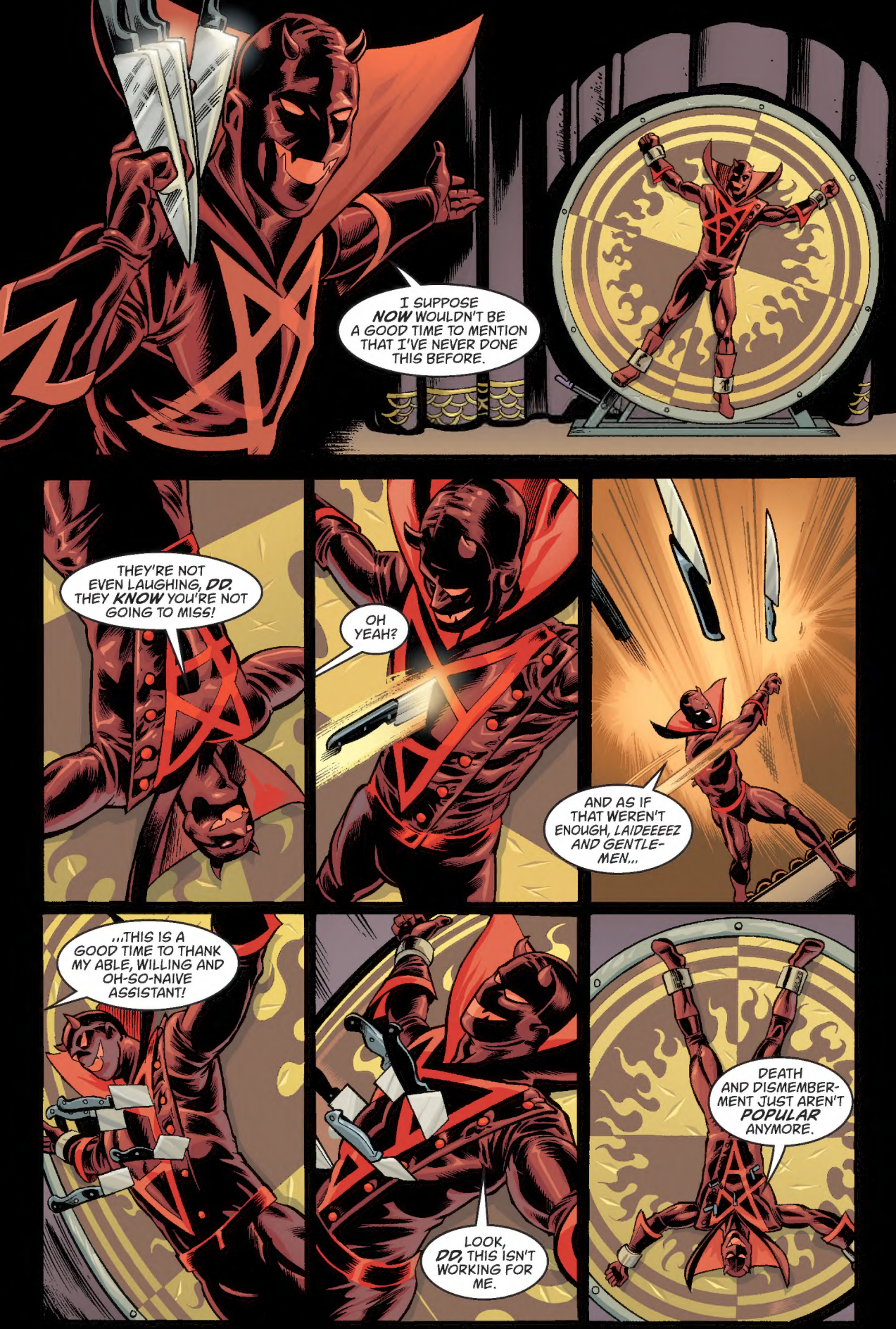
There is a war about to be fought outside the gates of this Paradise. It is a war to determine whether Paradise should exist or not if it costs others their lives and claim to their universal territories.

It is a war that will determine not only the afterlife of Marvel's greatest champions, but the lives of all those inhabitants of the realms of the living, inhabitants denied this Paradise in the light of Death's death.

It is a war of legends, gods, artificial intelligences, heroes and villains, but most of all, men.



PARADISE X: DEVILS


I SUPPOSE NOW WOULDN'T BE A GOOD TIME TO MENTION THAT I'VE NEVER DONE THIS BEFORE.
THEY'RE NOT EVEN LAUGHING, DD. THEY KNOW YOU'RE NOT GOING TO MISS!
OH YEAH?
AND AS IF THAT WEREN'T ENOUGH, LAIDEEEEZ AND GENTLE-MEN...
...THIS IS A GOOD TIME TO THANK MY ABLE, WILLING AND OH-SO-NAIVE ASSISTANT!
LOOK, DD, THIS ISN'T WORKING FOR ME.
DEATH AND DISMEMBER-MENT JUST AREN'T POPULAR ANYMORE.

DAREDEVIL'S
PANDEMONIUM &
MADHOUSE!
THERE'S NOTHING LIKE DEATH TO BRING THE FAMILY TOGETHER!
MASOCHISM FOR THE MASSES!
WE DON'T DEFY DEATH, WE EMBRACE IT!
"To Live and Die and Die and Die in LATVERIA!"
YOU WILL BELIEVE A MAN CAN DIE!
THIS IS EMBARRASSING. WE OUTNUMBER OUR FANS.

HOW CAN YOU SLEEP, DAD?
DD'S DA BOMB! OR AT LEAST HE WAS BEFORE HE EXPLODED.
SNSNSNOOOOOORRRRE
HUNH--? WHAZZAT?
OH, NOT THIS. YA MEAN TA TELL ME THIS YAHOO IS STILL DOIN' THIS SHOW? YOU KNOW IT'S ALL FAKE.
IN MY DAY, WE HAD WRESTLING. NOW THAT WAS REAL.
BESIDES, I WASN'T SLEEPIN'...I WAS TALKING TO YER UNCLE STRETCH.
HE MADE UP SOME KINDA DOOHICKA-MAJIGGY THAT LETS ME BE HERE AND THERE. IT'S SOME SORTA ASTRA...ASTRO... ASTROLL...
I THINK YOU MEAN "ASTRAL PROJECTION."
WHATEVER. IT'S JUST MY JOB TA MAKE LIKE AN ORANGE AND CONCENTRATE, YA KNOW?
BESIDES, DD AIN'T EVEN A SURPRISE. HE'S THIS OLD HERO WHO COULDN'T DIE NAME A' DEADPOOL. HE'S WADE WILSON. EVER'BODY KNOWS THAT.

FOR GOD'S SAKE, GRIMM, WAKE UP. HOW LONG CAN ONE MAN SLEEP?
THANK YOU, GENTLEMEN, FOR BEING HERE TODAY.
WHAT I PROPOSE WILL MARK US AS VILLAINS IN THE EYES OF MILLIONS.
BUT I DON'T BELIEVE THERE IS ANY OTHER COURSE WE CAN TAKE.
CAN ANY OF YOU THINK OF SOMEONE WE CAN EMPOWER TO BECOME THE GREATEST MASS MURDERER THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN?

THAT'S HARDLY WHAT WE'RE HERE FOR, REED.
THIS IS A MISSION OF PEACE. FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY. YOU KNOW THAT.
IT'S HARD NOT TO BE CYNICAL, BRUCE. THIS SEEMS CONTRARY TO EVERYTHING WE'VE FOUGHT FOR OUR ENTIRE LIVES...
...BUT TOO MANY ARE SUFFERING. TOO MANY LIE IN OUR HOSPITALS BEGGING FOR AN END THAT ISN'T COMING.
TOO MANY WAIT IN PAIN WHILE THE REST OF US ENJOY IMMORTALITY.
SEE? THERE'S MY POINT EXACTLY. WHAT OF THOSE NOT IN THE HOSPITALS?
THEY LIVE AS IF THERE IS NO TOMORROW, BECAUSE NOW THERE ISN'T ANY FEAR OF CONSEQUENCE.
THEY LIVE AS I ONCE DID.
THE DEATH OF DEATH HAS BEEN THE INEBRIATION OF OUR SPECIES, GENTLEMEN.
PLEASURE IS FAST BECOMING THE ULTIMATE GOAL...BUT PLEASURE TAKEN TO ITS ULTIMATE EXTREME WILL BECOME PAIN.
WE WILL ALL AWAKEN IN ONE OF THE HOSPITALS IF WE AREN'T CAUTIOUS.
YES, MY FRIENDS... IT APPEARS THAT FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND, WE MUST ONCE AGAIN BECOME A RACE MEASURED BY MORTALITY.
THE QUESTION IS HOW TO REGAIN WHAT MAR-VELL TOOK FROM US.

THE OTHER PROBLEM IS MEPHISTO.
HE'S A BIG REASON WHY THE HOSPITALS ARE FILLING UP WITH THE DYING.
HE ATTEMPTS TO KEEP MANKIND SUFFERING...
...AND MAKE CERTAIN THAT NO ONE ESCAPES TO THE NEW PARADISE THAT MAR-VELL HAS CREATED FOR THE DEAD.
ANY ATTEMPT TO STOP THE SUFFERING WILL BE MET BY HIM.
THERE ARE MANY FORMS OF SUFFERING, IMMORTUS.
AND WHILE I SHARE YOUR GOAL TO END THE PAIN OF MILLIONS, I HAVE SOME REASON TO BELIEVE THIS NEW PARADISE ISN'T ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE.
HMMMM...
FERGIVE ME FER SLEEPIN' THROUGH THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF YER DEBATE AN' ALL, BUT WHAT IN SAM HILL IS GOIN' ON HERE?
FIRST CAPT'N SHORTY HERE LEADS A CRUSADE TA GET 'NUFF POWER TO KILL DEATH... AN' NOW YOU WANT TO MAKE A NEW ONE?
WHATTA REVOLTIN' DEVELOPMENT THIS IS!
SORRY, BEN.
I'LL BEGIN WITH THE LAST MOMENTS OF MY-- MAR-VELL'S ATTACK ON DEATH IN HER REALM. THIS IS MY LAST MEMORY AS A BINARY BEING.

"AS YOU RECALL, I LED A NUMBER OF HEROES ON A QUEST AROUND THE ***UNIVERSE*** TO COLLECT WEAPONS OF ARCANE AND ANCIENT POWER.

"EACH WEAPON, EACH ITEM OF UNLIMITED POWER, WAS THEN TRANSPORTED TO THIS OTHERWORLD TO EMPOWER MY SOUL--MY ***OTHER SOUL,*** THAT IS-- TO FIGHT DEATH AND ***END HER LIFE.***

"EVEN THOSE I ONCE CALLED ***ENEMIES*** JOINED ME IN THIS STRUGGLE."

WAIT.

"SHE NEVER UTTERED A WORD UNTIL IT WAS ***TOO LATE.***

"SHE TOLD US TO WAIT, AS IF THERE WAS SOMETHING WE COULDN'T SEE. THERE WAS ACTUALLY ***CARE*** IN HER VOICE. BUT IT WAS TOO LATE.

"AS IF ANY OF US COULD EVEN ***UNDERSTAND*** THAT THE BEING WE HAD LOOKED UPON FOR SO MANY YEARS AS A CURSE MIGHT ALSO BE A ***MERCY...*** A BLESSING, OF SORTS.

"THIS WAS ALL PART OF MAR-VELL'S PLAN... BUT I WASN'T EVEN AWARE OF IT UNTIL IT WAS ***ALL OVER.***

"WHEN SOMETHING IS BROKEN DOWN TO ITS ATOMIC STRUCTURE AS A RESULT OF THE WEAPON KNOWN AS THE ***ULTIMATE NULLIFIER,*** IT'S IMMEDIATELY TRANSPORTED TO THE HEART OF THE ***NEGATIVE ZONE.***

"MY ***PLAN***...MY OTHER BEING'S PLAN... WASN'T TO ***KILL*** DEATH TO RETAKE HER THRONE AND BRING A NEW GOVERNMENT TO THE REALM OF THE DEAD...

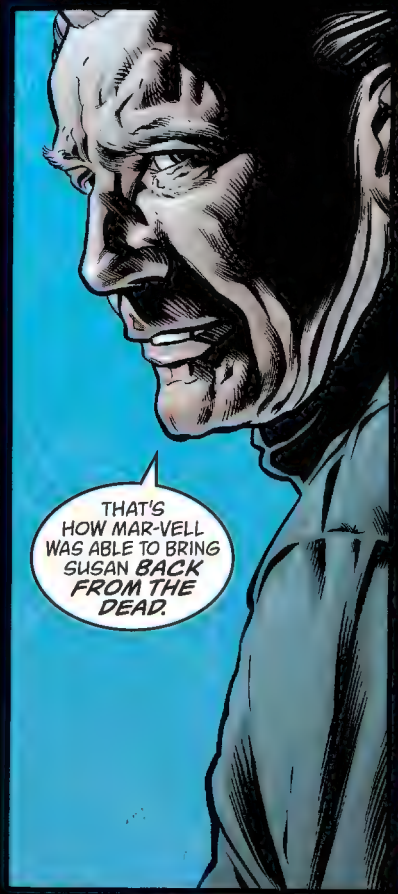
"...BUT TO USE THE NULLIFICATION OF HER POWER, HER BEING, TO CREATE A ***BRIDGE*** FROM THE REALM OF THE DEAD INTO THE NEGATIVE ZONE.

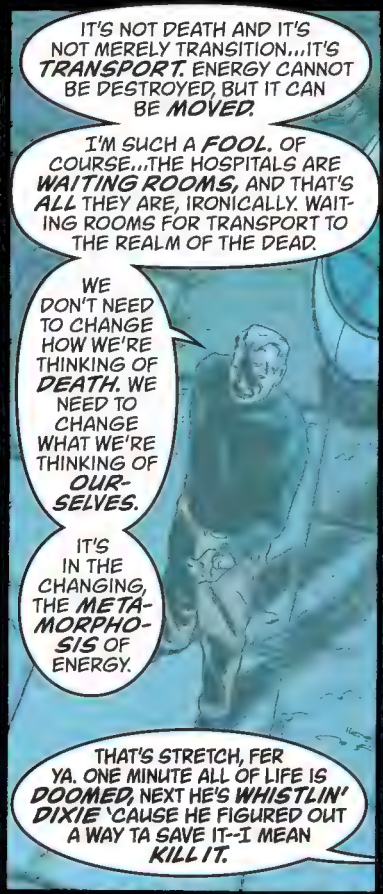
"TO A CERTAIN DEGREE, THE QUEST BEGAN AS A MATTER OF ***FAITH.***

"THE OTHER MAR-VELL WASN'T OMNISCIENT WHEN IT BEGAN, BUT TRUSTED THAT WHEN HE KNEW EVERYTHING, WHEN HE HAD CONSUMED THE ***COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS*** AS A RESULT OF HIS QUEST, HE WOULD KNOW HOW TO ESCAPE FROM DEATH'S REALM.

"THE ***EXODUS*** FROM HER REALM WAS THE LAST THING I SAW, MY LAST MOMENT AS A KREE."

LAST MOMENT AS A KREE?
I'M NO LONGER IN TOUCH WITH ANYTHING FROM MY CULTURE. THE KREE NO LONGER EXIST IN THIS REALM.
I DON'T EVEN HAVE MANY MEMORIES OF MY RACE. MAR-VELL TOOK THOSE, AS WELL.
MY PARENTS WERE THE ARTIFICIAL BEINGS ADAM AND EVE... SOMEHOW THEIR COUPLING RESULTED IN A TRUE HUMAN... ME.
I JUST CAN'T BELIEVE THERE'S A PART OF ME THAT WILLINGLY CAUSED SO MUCH SUFFERING AROUND THE WORLD.
PART OF WHAT WE LEARNED DURING YOUR QUEST FOR POWER, MARV, WAS THAT THERE WAS A UNIVERSE BEFORE THIS ONE, ONE THAT SHATTERED AND SPLINTERED.
MY BELIEF IS THAT DEATH AS A FORCE MAY HAVE BEEN SHATTERED, TOO...AND THE DEATH ANY OF US HAVE EXPERIENCED AS A RESULT OF THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE IS NOT DEATH IN FULL.
THE DEATH YOUR OTHER IDENTITY SLEW, MAR-VELL, WAS NOT COMPLETE.
SAM?
FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT AWARE, I WAS ONCE KNOWN AS THE PLANTMAN.
I WAS A PRETTY BAD SUPER-VILLAIN WHEN YOU CONSIDER HOW MY POWER COULD HAVE AIDED THE STARVING AND THE WEAK...SO I HAVE MUCH TO ATONE FOR.
THE VEGETATION OF THIS WORLD HAS NOT FOLLOWED SUIT WITH HUMANITY...
...THE WORLD CONTINUES TO SPIN, AND AFTER THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT AND REORGANIZATION OF THE WORLD'S VIBRANIUM, THE SEASONS RETURNED, AS WELL.
WHEN YOU SAID YA WERE A SUPER-VILLAIN, YA WERE TALKIN' PAST TENSE, RIGHT?
BY THE WAY, SMITHERS, HOW'D YA GROW A BEARD SO FAST AT YER AGE? DIPPIN' INTA YER OWN PLANT GROWTH JUICE, ARE YA?
DEATH STILL TOUCHES VEGETATION, THOUGH. FROM WHAT YOU WERE SAYING, THERE ARE NO ANIMALS IN THIS REALM OF THE DEAD, CORRECT?
SO IT SEEMS THAT THE DEATH MAR-VELL KILLED WAS A DEATH AFFECTING SENTIENT CREATURES ALONE...
...THEREFORE SUPPORTING RICHARDS' PROPOSAL THAT DEATH AS A FORCE HAS BEEN THWARTED ONLY IN ITS ABILITY TO STRIKE AT THOSE WHO SEEK TO RULE OVER THE REST OF NATURE.

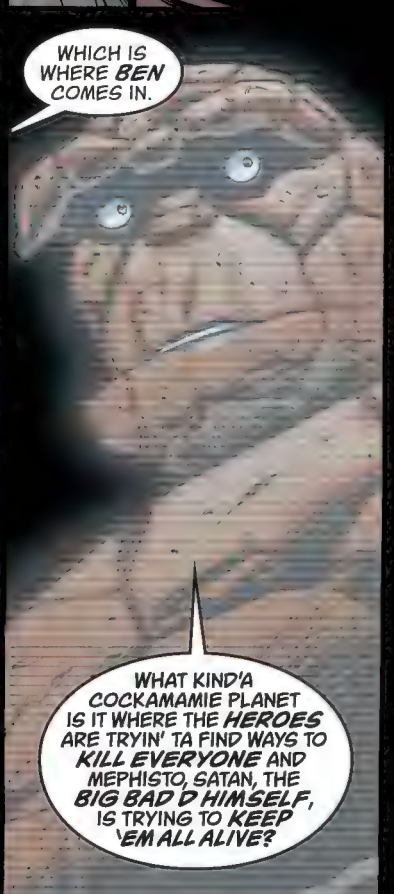

THAT'S HOW MAR-VELL WAS ABLE TO BRING SUSAN BACK FROM THE DEAD.


IT'S NOT DEATH AND IT'S NOT MERELY TRANSITION...IT'S TRANSPORT. ENERGY CANNOT BE DESTROYED, BUT IT CAN BE MOVED.
I'M SUCH A FOOL. OF COURSE...THE HOSPITALS ARE WAITING ROOMS, AND THAT'S ALL THEY ARE, IRONICALLY. WAITING ROOMS FOR TRANSPORT TO THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
WE DON'T NEED TO CHANGE HOW WE'RE THINKING OF DEATH. WE NEED TO CHANGE WHAT WE'RE THINKING OF OURSELVES.
IT'S IN THE CHANGING, THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ENERGY.
THAT'S STRETCH, FER YA. ONE MINUTE ALL OF LIFE IS DOOMED, NEXT HE'S WHISTLIN' DIXIE 'CAUSE HE FIGURED OUT A WAY TA SAVE IT--I MEAN KILL IT.

SO DO WE GO TO THE NEW HEAVEN? DO WE ATTEMPT TO REACH THE OMNISCIENT MAR-VELL AND SEE IF HE CAN CHANGE THIS?
BREAK DOWN WHATEVER SEEMS TO BE BLOCKING THIS PATH OF ENERGY YOU SPEAK OF?
I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW I KNOW THIS, BUT I DON'T THINK WE CAN TRUST AN OMNISCIENT MAR-VELL.

AND THE DOORWAY TO THE NEGATIVE ZONE CAN NOW ONLY BE OPENED FROM THE INSIDE...THE PORTAL I CREATED WAS CLOSED LONG AGO, FOR BETTER OR WORSE.
THERE'S NO WAY TO CONTACT MAR-VELL...

...THE OTHER MAR-VELL, EVEN IF IT WERE A GOOD IDEA.
WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO COME UP WITH A NEW DEATH OF OUR OWN.


WHICH IS WHERE BEN COMES IN.
WHAT KIND'A COCKAMAMIE PLANET IS IT WHERE THE HEROES ARE TRYIN' TA FIND WAYS TO KILL EVERYONE AND MEPHISTO, SATAN, THE BIG BAD D HIMSELF, IS TRYING TO KEEP 'EM ALL ALIVE?

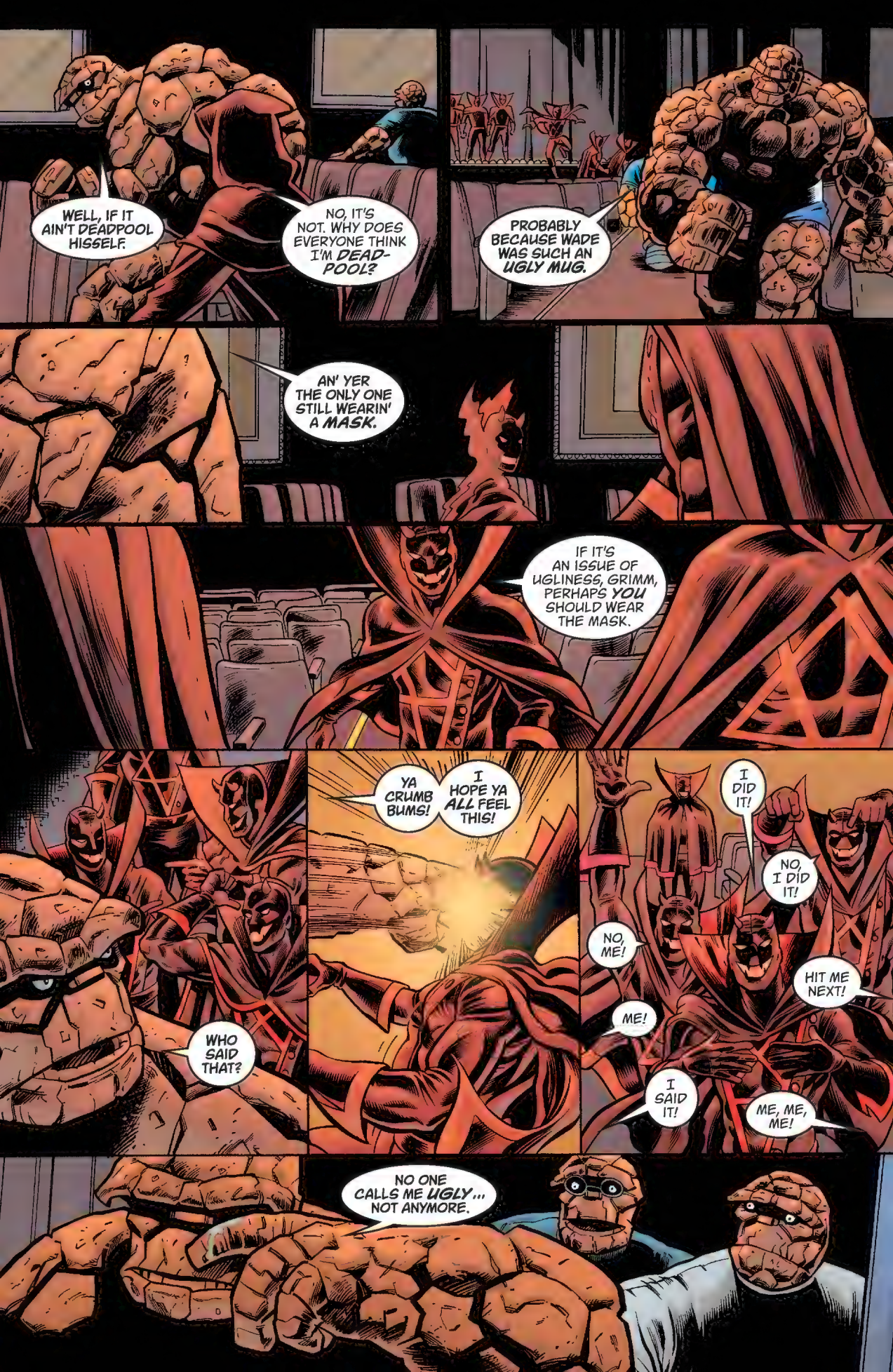
WE NEED A BEING WITH THE POWER OF ENTROPIC BREAK-DOWN.
DON'T MAKE ME BEG, BEN. YOU WERE THERE. TELL THEM.
BEG? ENTROPIC BREAKDOWN? WHAT IN THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
OH... JUDE. YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT JUDE! AND YOU WANT ME TA TALK ABOUT JUDE? ME?
FER ONCE, I'M NOT JUS' HERE CAUSE I'M GOOD AT CLOBBERIN'? I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. OKAY...
"...A BUNCH'A YEARS AGO, CAPTAIN AMERICA AND I FOUGHT AGAINST THIS RELIGIOUS CULT THAT WAS TRYING TA BRING THIS CRAZY GUY CALLED JUDE, THE ENTROPIC MAN BACK TA LIFE WITH THE COSMIC CUBE.
"FUNNY THING WAS, JUDE DIDN'T EVEN FIGHT US, IT WAS ONLY THE WACKOS THAT PUT UP ANY KIND'A STRUGGLE.
"ANYHOW, JUDE SAID HE'D RETURN WHEN MANKIND BEGGED HIM TO. SIMPLE AS THAT. HE TURNED INTO A BIG ROCK, AND WE LEFT IT AT THAT.
"FIGURED NO ONE WOULD EVER GO TO A THINGAMAJIGGER AND BEG IT TO COME BACK AND KILL EVERYONE...ESPECIALLY NOT THE GOOD GUYS."

MY PLAN IS TO TRAP JUDE AFTER HIS RETURN...
...TO SYNTHESIZE HIM, AND ARTIFICIALLY REPLICATE HIS ABILITIES TO METE OUT MOLECULAR ENTROPY FOR THOSE IN NEED OF IT.
I HAVE A RECENTLY-BUILT FORCE FIELD THAT HELPS SUE OUT NOW THAT SHE NO LONGER HAS THE POWER OF INVISIBILITY.
GENTLEMEN, DO I HAVE YOUR SUPPORT?
WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE? WE'RE GOING TO BRING BACK DEATH, AND THEN CONTROL IT?
IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING? AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO AGREES WITH BEN?
SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE...
WE'VE ALL BEEN TOUCHED BY DEATH, BRUCE. WE'VE ALL GROWN TO HATE IT.
I LOST SUE.
BUT SHE CAME BACK, REED. ADAM WARLOCK AND MAR-VELL BROUGHT HER BACK.
IT COST YOU YOUR ARM, BUT WE'D ALL GIVE OUR LIVES TO BRING BACK LOVED ONES.

YES, WE'D DO ANYTHING TO HAVE THEM BACK, BUT TO EASE OUR SUFFERING, NOT THEIRS.
IMAGINE... SCOTT, YOU LOST PHOENIX. WHAT IF IT WERE HER SUFFERING, BEGGING FOR DEATH?
YOU LOST BETTY, BRUCE.
YOU SOUGHT YOUR OWN WAYS TO TRY AND SAVE PRINCESS RAVONNA, IMMORTUS.
HENRY... ALLISON IS SUFFERING RIGHT NOW. MEPHISTO STOLE HER HEART, HENRY. HE TOOK IT AWAY.
SAM, I'M AFRAID I DON'T--
HER NAME WAS JENNIFER. AND SHE LOVED ME.
UNA.
I CRIED FER SUZY TOO, YA KNOW.

WE FEAR DEATH, WE HATE IT, BECAUSE OUR SUFFERING IS ONE OF LOSS.
BUT WE SHOULD BE MORE AFRAID OF WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF DEATH NEVER CAME.
WE KNOW THROUGH MAR-VELL THAT THERE IS SOMETHING BEYOND THIS LIFE...
...BUT IT WILL BE DENIED US--AND THEM--IF WE DON'T DO THIS.
I'M SORRY, REED. I CAN'T. I HAVE TO BELIEVE THERE'S A DIFFERENT WAY.
THE HULK KILLED TOO MANY FOR ME TO CONSCIOUSLY BE A PART OF THIS.
I UNDERSTAND, BRUCE. IT'S OKAY.
WHAT WE DO NOW WE DO FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND. AND NOT EVERYONE'S GOING TO SEE IT THAT WAY.
BEN, YOU BETTER TELL YOUR SONS TO GET READY. SORRY TO CUT THE MATINEE SHORT.
'S'OKAY, STRETCH. YA SEEN ONE DAREDEVIL, YA SEEN 'EM ALL.

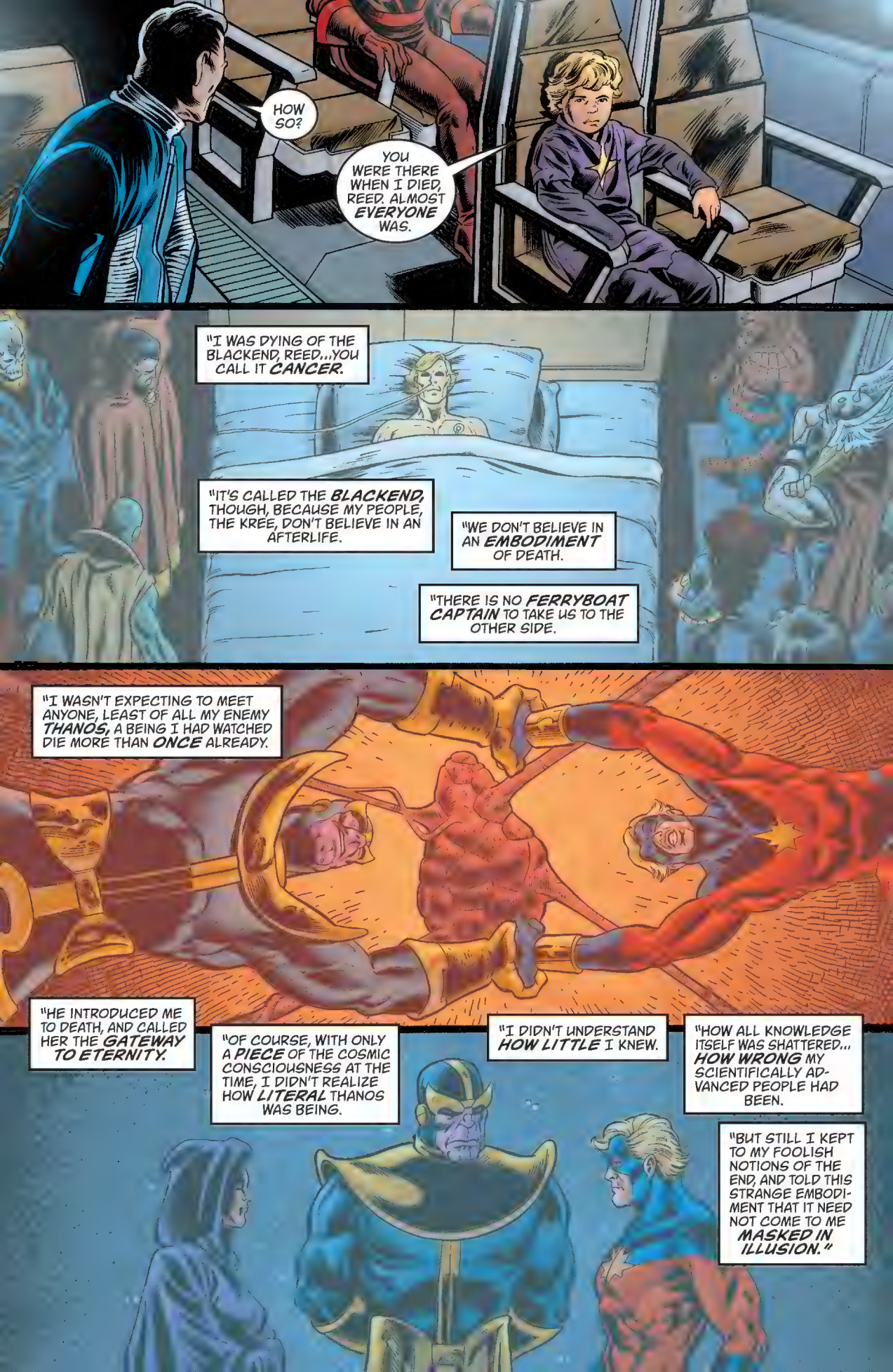
WHAZZAT? HUNH?
WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE SHOW?
HUH? OH, IT WAS OKAY, I S'POSE, IF YA LIKE THAT SORT OF THING.
I MEAN, IT'S LIKE FIGHTIN' DOC DOOM, YA KNOW? YA THINK HE'S DEAD. THEN HE'S BACK. THEN YA BLOW HIM UP. THEN HE'S BACK AGAIN.
THEN YA DUMP 'IM IN THE NEGATIVE ZONE, AN THEN HE'S BACK. BLAH BLAH BLAH.
YO, BUZZ...CHUCK... PACK UP. FER US, THE DAREDEVILS' 72-HOUR MURDERTHON IS COMIN' TO A CLOSE.
BUT DON'T FRET, I'M SURE THEY'LL COME BACK TO LATVERIA SOON.
THEY GOTTA GO WHERE THE FANS ARE, YA KNOW?
CAN WE COME?
FINE BY ME.


WELL, IF IT AIN'T DEADPOOL HISSELF.
NO, IT'S NOT. WHY DOES EVERYONE THINK I'M DEAD-POOL?
PROBABLY BECAUSE WADE WAS SUCH AN UGLY MUG.
AN' YER THE ONLY ONE STILL WEARIN' A MASK.
IF IT'S AN ISSUE OF UGLINESS, GRIMM, PERHAPS YOU SHOULD WEAR THE MASK.
WHO SAID THAT?
YA CRUMB BUMS!
I HOPE YA ALL FEEL THIS!
I DID IT!
NO, I DID IT!
NO, ME!
HIT ME NEXT!
ME!
I SAID IT!
ME, ME, ME!
NO ONE CALLS ME UGLY... NOT ANYMORE.

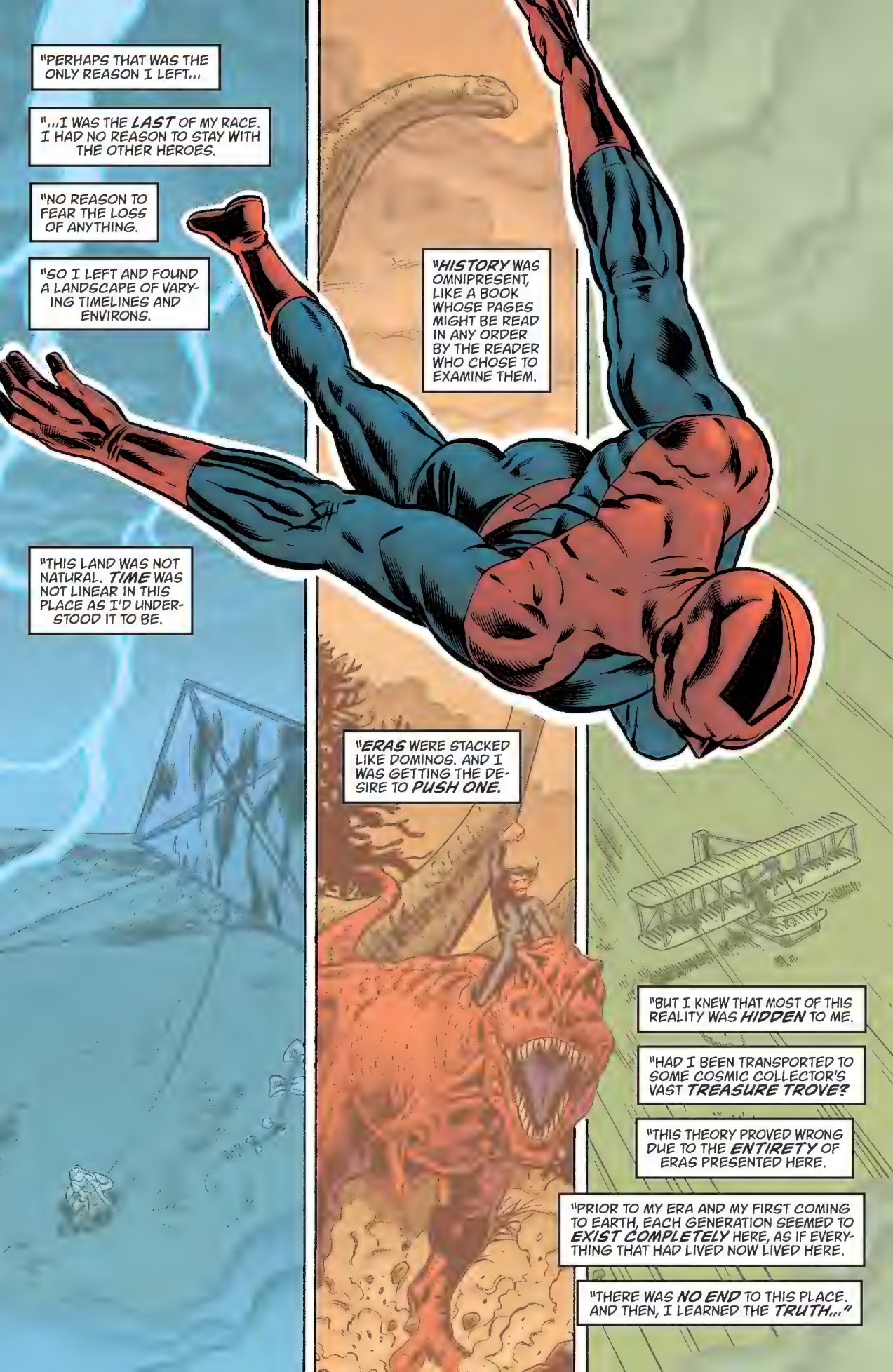
UGLY. THEY CALLED ME UGLY.
THAT WAS THREE HOURS AGO, DAD. AND YOU STARTED IT BY SAYING DEADPOOL WAS UGLY. IT'S YER OWN FAULT.
THAT'S DIFFERENT! YOU KIDS'VE GOT A LOT TA LEARN.
YER PROOF THAT HOME SCHOOLIN' STILL AIN'T EVERYTHIN'... EVEN IF YER UNCLE REED IS YER TEACHER.
BEN, YOU ARE A CONSTANT AND UNWAVERING AXIOM IN A SEA OF TURMOIL.
SURE, CURLY, WHATEVER THAT MEANS. BUT I AIN'T UGLY.
AN' THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT!
NEXT STOP, THE EVERGLADES.

HANK'S DRIVING. WHAT'D YA WANT, STRETCH?
I WANT YOU TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED THE FIRST TIME YOU MET JUDE, BEN.
"I GUESS IT STARTED WITH PROJECT PEGASUS... ANOTHER A' THOSE TOP SECRET GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS EVEN MY AUNT PETUNIA NEVER LIKED TO TALK ABOUT.
"I'D GONE THERE TRYIN' TA HELP A FRIEND, AN' GOT CAUGHT UP IN A CONSPIRACY TA RECREATE THE GOLL-DANGED COSMIC CUBE SO A BUNCHA RELIGIOUS YAHOOS COULD USE THE POWER'A GOD TA BRING BACK THIS CHARACTER FROM ONE'A THEIR ANCIENT MUMBO-JUMBO HISTORY BOOKS!
"EVEN OL' CAP AMERICA AN THE MAN-THING COULDN'T HELP ME STOP THIS THING CALLED THE ENTROPIC MAN FROM COMIN' BACK TA LIFE.
"I DIDN'T EVEN TOUCH JUDE, AN I WAS ALREADY REVERTIN' BACK TA PLAIN OL' BENJAMIN J. GRIMM.
"TURNED OUT JUDE DIDN'T EVEN WANNA BE THERE IF WE DIDN'T WANT 'IM AROUND...
"...HE THOUGHT HUMANITY WANTED TA DIE, WANTED THE PARADISE HE WAS OFFERIN'..."
PARADISE. DID JUDE REALLY USE THAT TERM?
PARADISE?

YEAH...I GUESS HE SAID PARADISE.
SO, ANYHOW, JUDE SAID HE WOULDN'T RETURN AN' KILL EVERYONE UNTIL WE BEGGED 'IM TO. BAD DAY TA BE A RELIGIOUS WACKO, I SUPPOSE.
HE TURNED INTA SOME KINDA CRYSTAL VERSION A' HIMSELF.
"IF REED WUZ THERE, HE'D'A FIGURED SOME KINDA WAY TA SAY JUDE WAS FUSED TA THE COSMIC CUBE.
"'COURSE, STRETCH WASN'T THERE, SO WHY WASTE TIME THINKIN' SOMETHIN' OUT, YA KNOW?"
SO ROGERS AND I LEFT, THINKIN' THERE'D NEVER BE A DAY WHEN ANYBODY'D WANT SOMETHIN' LIKE JUDE TA RETURN.
BUT HERE WE ARE, ANYWHO.
I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS, REED.
YOUR NOTION OF SHATTERED FORCE FOR DEATH GROWS IN MERIT WITH EACH MOMENT.


HOW SO?
YOU WERE THERE WHEN I DIED, REED. ALMOST EVERYONE WAS.
"I WAS DYING OF THE BLACKEND, REED...YOU CALL IT CANCER.
"IT'S CALLED THE BLACKEND, THOUGH, BECAUSE MY PEOPLE, THE KREE, DON'T BELIEVE IN AN AFTERLIFE.
"WE DON'T BELIEVE IN AN EMBODIMENT OF DEATH.
"THERE IS NO FERRYBOAT CAPTAIN TO TAKE US TO THE OTHER SIDE.
"I WASN'T EXPECTING TO MEET ANYONE, LEAST OF ALL MY ENEMY THANOS, A BEING I HAD WATCHED DIE MORE THAN ONCE ALREADY.
"HE INTRODUCED ME TO DEATH, AND CALLED HER THE GATEWAY TO ETERNITY.
"OF COURSE, WITH ONLY A PIECE OF THE COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE TIME, I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW LITERAL THANOS WAS BEING.
"I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW LITTLE I KNEW.
"HOW ALL KNOWLEDGE ITSELF WAS SHATTERED... HOW WRONG MY SCIENTIFICALLY ADVANCED PEOPLE HAD BEEN.
"BUT STILL I KEPT TO MY FOOLISH NOTIONS OF THE END, AND TOLD THIS STRANGE EMBODIMENT THAT IT NEED NOT COME TO ME MASKED IN ILLUSION."

"I EXPECTED TO FIND MYSELF FACING NOTHING. NO DEATH. NO THANOS. NOTHING.
"INSTEAD, I WAS EMBRACED BY MY IGNORANCE.
"AND I KNEW THAT ALL OF THIS WAS FAR, FAR FROM OVER. LIFE GOES ON."
INTERESTING. DEATH CAME DISGUISED... THAT'S THE MOST INTERESTING THING.
SUSAN REMEMBERS NOTHING OF HER TIME IN THIS REALM OF THE DEAD YOU'VE SPOKEN OF. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER, MAR-VELL?
"IT WAS ANOTHER WORLD, REED...BUT ONE THAT WAS A HISTORICAL ECHO OF SORTS TO THE ONE I HAD LEFT.
"THOSE HEROES WHO DIED ON EARTH LIVED HERE. AND THOSE WHO STILL LIVED, WE BELIEVED TO BE DEAD.
"OF COURSE, I HAD NO RECOLLECTION OF THIS OTHER LIFE...ONLY THAT BECAUSE THERE WAS NO OTHER MEMBER OF THE KREE RACE THERE, THAT SOMEHOW I WAS ITS ONLY SURVIVING MEMBER.
"BUT THAT WAS THE PROBLEM, REED--I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS DEAD.
"AND SO, I HAD NOTHING TO FEAR AS SO MANY OF THE OTHER HEROES DID.
"THEY FEARED LOSING THE FEW THAT WERE NEAR TO THEM.
"THEY FEARED LOSING THEIR WORLD, ALL THEY HAD TO HOLD ON TO.
"I THINK SOMEHOW THEY ALL SUSPECTED...AND THAT MADE THEM LESS WILLING TO CONSIDER THEIR CONTEXT."


"PERHAPS THAT WAS THE ONLY REASON I LEFT...
"...I WAS THE LAST OF MY RACE. I HAD NO REASON TO STAY WITH THE OTHER HEROES.
"NO REASON TO FEAR THE LOSS OF ANYTHING.
"SO I LEFT AND FOUND A LANDSCAPE OF VARYING TIMELINES AND ENVIRONS.
"HISTORY WAS OMNIPRESENT, LIKE A BOOK WHOSE PAGES MIGHT BE READ IN ANY ORDER BY THE READER WHO CHOSE TO EXAMINE THEM.
"THIS LAND WAS NOT NATURAL. TIME WAS NOT LINEAR IN THIS PLACE AS I'D UNDERSTOOD IT TO BE.
"ERAS WERE STACKED LIKE DOMINOS. AND I WAS GETTING THE DESIRE TO PUSH ONE.
"BUT I KNEW THAT MOST OF THIS REALITY WAS HIDDEN TO ME.
"HAD I BEEN TRANSPORTED TO SOME COSMIC COLLECTOR'S VAST TREASURE TROVE?
"THIS THEORY PROVED WRONG DUE TO THE ENTIRETY OF ERAS PRESENTED HERE.
"PRIOR TO MY ERA AND MY FIRST COMING TO EARTH, EACH GENERATION SEEMED TO EXIST COMPLETELY HERE, AS IF EVERYTHING THAT HAD LIVED NOW LIVED HERE.
"THERE WAS NO END TO THIS PLACE. AND THEN, I LEARNED THE TRUTH..."

"...THIS WAS THE END.
"AND FOR THE SECOND TIME IN MY LIFE, I REALIZED HOW WRONG WE KREE WERE. THERE WAS SOMETHING AFTER THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH, AFTER ALL.
"IT WAS A CONFINEMENT SHACKLED IN MEMORY AND CAGED IN TRADITION.
"I COULDN'T GO BACK, COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO CHOOSE AN ERA AND MAKE A PLACE FOR MYSELF THERE.
"I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW I COULD BE THE ONLY MEMBER OF MY RACE HERE...AND SO I WAITED...AND WATCHED THIS IMPOSSIBLE FIGUREHEAD OF DEATH.
"I WATCHED HER DRAW THANOS FROM THE LAND OF THE LIVING INTO THIS REALITY TIME AND TIME AGAIN.
"MEPHISTO ALSO SHOWED SIMILAR ABILITIES TO PASS BETWEEN METAPHYSICAL REALITIES.
"HE WAS ABLE TO DRAW THE LIVING INTO THE REALM OF THE DEAD, AS WELL. I SAW OLD ALLIES I KNEW NOT TO BE PART OF THIS REALM.
"AND LEARNED THAT IT WAS POSSIBLE TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN DEATH AND LIFE.
"WHAT I LACKED IN ORDER TO ESCAPE THIS REALM WAS THE POWER AND UNDERSTANDING TO ACCOMPLISH THIS FEAT.
"SOMETIMES I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I SAW... OR HOW CLOSE I WAS TO GETTING MY FULL COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS BACK."

"AND ONE DAY, I REALIZED THAT THE POWER I NEEDED WAS COSMIC IN ORIGIN.
"PERHAPS IT WAS THE LITTLE OF THE COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS THAT STILL RESTED WITHIN ME. I'M NOT CERTAIN ANYMORE.
"THE SILVER SURFER WAS THE ONLY ALLY I HAD WHO SEEMED CAPABLE OF BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN METAPHYSICAL REALITIES.
"I HELPED HIM ESCAPE ANOTHER TRAP DEVISED BY THANOS...OR PERHAPS BY DEATH. BUT THIS TIME I LET HIM SEE ME.
"I WANTED HIM TO REMEMBER I WAS HERE. I WANTED THE COSMIC POWER THAT HE WAS A PART OF TO KNOW I WAS HERE. I WANTED IT TO SEEK ME OUT.
"AND ONE DAY, WHEN A HERO IMBUED WITH ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE POWER COSMIC KNOWN AS THE ENIGMA FORCE DIED, THE POWER CAME TO ME.
"AND I WAS TRANSFIGURED.
"BUT IT WASN'T ENOUGH FOR ME TO ESCAPE.
"I KNEW THAT IF ANYONE WERE STILL IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD AFTER I'D ESCAPED, I WOULDN'T BE FREE AT ALL. THAT IS NOT THE WAY OF HEROES.
"AND SO I BEGAN TO PLAN THE DEATH OF DEATH AND THE LIBERATION FROM HER CURSE.
"I BEGAN TO PLAN THE FREEDOM OF ALL OF HISTORY."

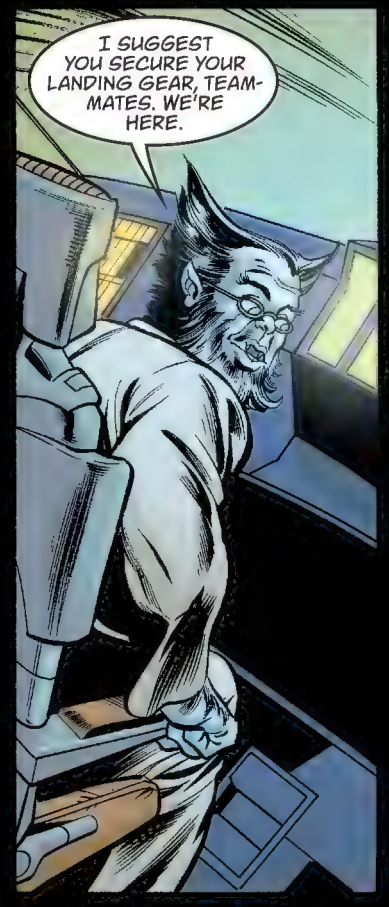
DON'T ASK ME WHAT HAPPENED, REED. I DON'T KNOW.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY OTHER SELF IS DOING NOW. I'M CUT OFF.
I DON'T KNOW WHY HE LEFT THE REST OF MANKIND TO SUFFER LIKE THIS.

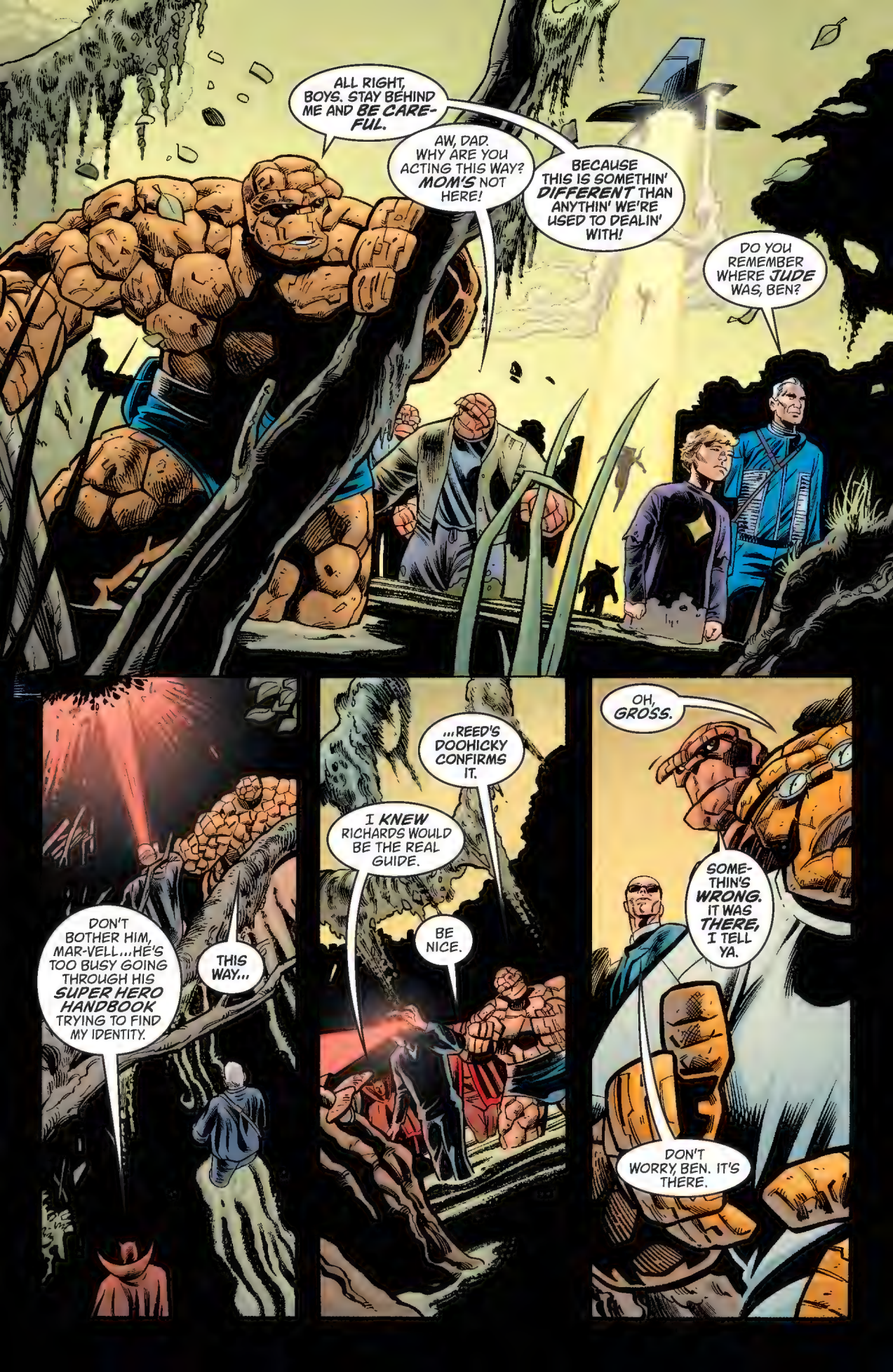
I GOT IT! IF YER NOT DEADPOOL, YER REALLY THIS GUY SPIDER-WOMAN TOLD ME ABOUT...A GUY CURSED BY MORGAN LEFAY TA LIVE FOREVER.
NO.

OKAY, THEN YER A SKRULL, AND YER JUST SHAPE-SHIFTIN' YER VITAL ORGANS AROUND WHEN YA PRETEND TA KILL YERSELF?
YER PRETTY CLEVER. THIS AIN'T A HATRACK UP HERE, IF YA GET MY MEANIN'.

STRETCH AIN'T THE ONLY ONE WIT' IMAGINATION. THIS IS PART OF AN INVASION A' EARTH. YA SUCKIN' SKRULLS...
...THAT'S WHY THERE'S MORE OF YOU DAREDEVILS THAN EVER BEFORE!

SHUT UP! I AM NOBODY!


I SUGGEST YOU SECURE YOUR LANDING GEAR, TEAM-MATES. WE'RE HERE.

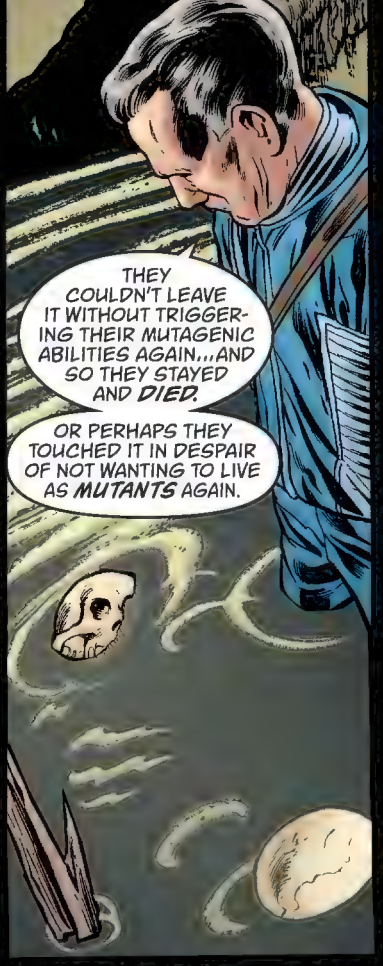

ALL RIGHT, BOYS. STAY BEHIND ME AND BE CAREFUL.
AW, DAD. WHY ARE YOU ACTING THIS WAY? MOM'S NOT HERE!
BECAUSE THIS IS SOMETHIN' DIFFERENT THAN ANYTHIN' WE'RE USED TO DEALIN' WITH!
DO YOU REMEMBER WHERE JUDE WAS, BEN?
DON'T BOTHER HIM, MAR-VELL...HE'S TOO BUSY GOING THROUGH HIS SUPER HERO HANDBOOK TRYING TO FIND MY IDENTITY.
THIS WAY...
...REED'S DOOHICKY CONFIRMS IT.
I KNEW RICHARDS WOULD BE THE REAL GUIDE.
BE NICE.
OH, GROSS.
SOMETHIN'S WRONG. IT WAS THERE, I TELL YA.
DON'T WORRY, BEN. IT'S THERE.

LUCKY STIFFS.
HERE'S WHERE I MAKE MYSELF USEFUL.
YOU HAVE NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE BEAUTY OF THE VEGETATION HERE...
...IT COVERED THE CRYSTAL IN AN ATTEMPT TO SAVE MANKIND...
FROM WHAT?
FROM COMING HERE.
FROM TRUSTING IN THE CRYSTAL AS A CURE FOR THEIR OWN MUTATIONS.
FROM ALLOWING THEM TO BECOME AFRAID AND DEPENDENT UPON ITS INTOXICATION AND PROMISES OF LIFE...SO MUCH SO THAT THEY WOULDN'T DARE LEAVE.
THERE'D BE A LOT MORE BODIES HERE IF THEY HADN'T COVERED IT UP.

YEAH, YEAH, YEAH... YA TALK TA THE TREES... I'M BUSHED JUS' LISTENIN' TA YA JABBER ON.
EVERYTHING HAS A VOICE, GRIMM...EVEN THE STONES THEMSELVES SPEAK OF THE BEAUTY OF NATURE. WE JUST CAN'T HEAR THEM.
THE ROCKS, HUH? VERY FUNNY.
OH, GROSS! LOOK AT DAD!
WHADDAYA KNOW...IT STILL WORKS.
GET AWAY FROM THERE, BEN!
BUT, STRETCH, IT'S NOT GONNA HURT ME, IT'S...
SAM, CAN YOU HELP?

BUT I ONLY WANTED TA TOUCH IT...

IT'S AS I SUSPECTED. THE POWER IS NOT DORMANT OR ASLEEP.
IT'S MERELY TRAPPED... LIMITED OR QUANTIFIED TO THIS PLACE.
I THINK THIS JUDE CRYSTAL SOMEHOW STABILIZED THEIR MUTATION TO THE DEGREE OF APPROACH.
IT BREAKS DOWN GENETIC STRUCTURE IN INTERVALS, BEGINNING WITH THE MUTATION.

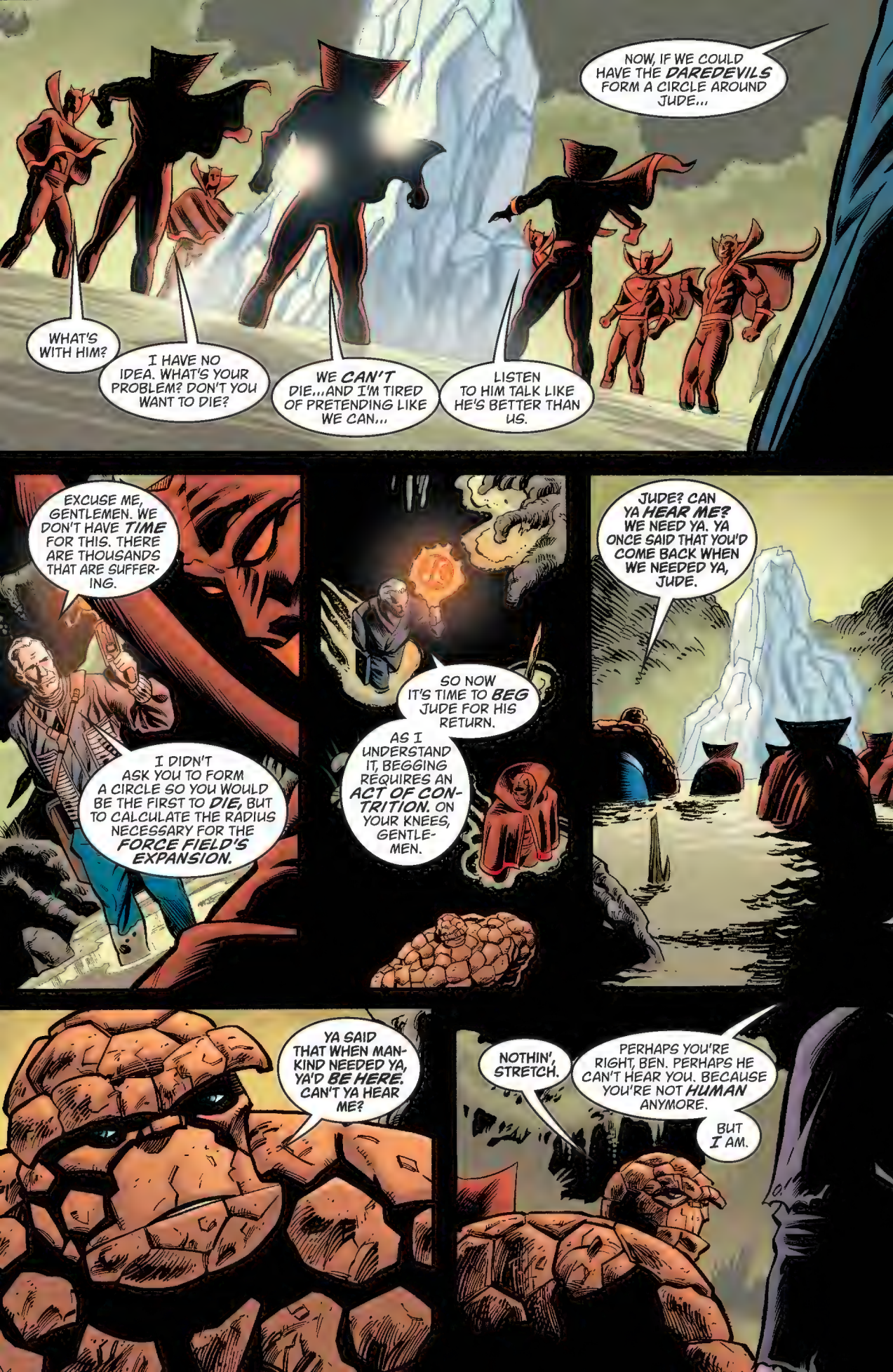

THEY COULDN'T LEAVE IT WITHOUT TRIGGERING THEIR MUTAGENIC ABILITIES AGAIN...AND SO THEY STAYED AND DIED.
OR PERHAPS THEY TOUCHED IT IN DESPAIR OF NOT WANTING TO LIVE AS MUTANTS AGAIN.

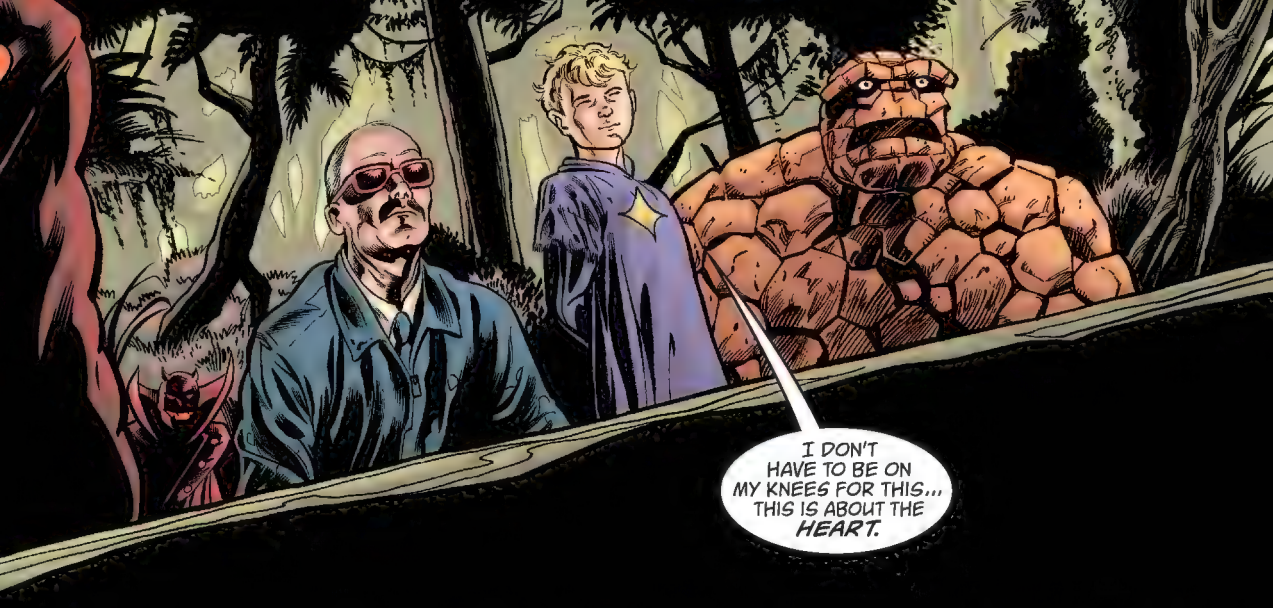
WHAT THE DING DONG DO YOU THINK YER DOIN'? I OUGHTTA CLOBBER YA ONE. I OUGHTTA RIP YER--

LIKE YOU DID TO THE LIFE FORM THAT JUST SAVED YOUR BUTT?
YOU MURDERER... WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE TO TREAT THEM THIS WAY?

THEY'LL GROW BACK. RELAX.
HEY REED, WATCH OUT! YER STEPPIN' ON DA GRASS.
LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, SMITHERS. LUCKY GRASS.
I REALLY DIDN'T HAVE A REASON TO HATE YOU ALL WHEN I WAS A VILLAIN, BUT NOW...

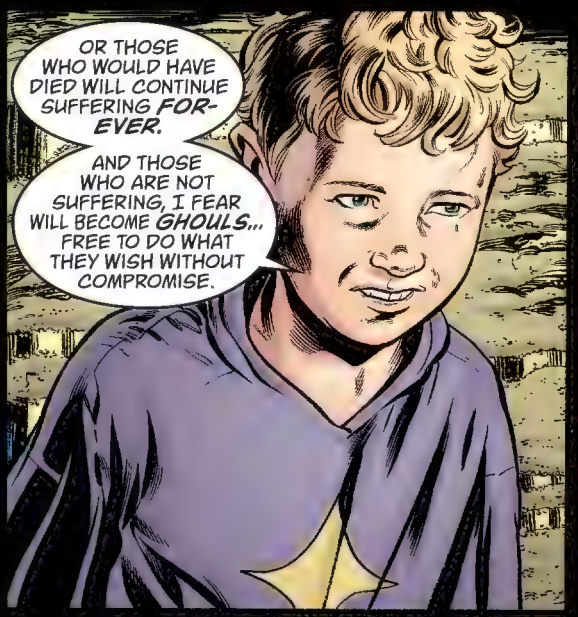
IT'S NOT LIKE WE CAN JUST MAKE FRIENDS WITH THIS GUY. HE'S A FREAK. HE'LL KILL US ALL.
I JUS' KNOW YOU HAVE SOME SORT'A THING THUNKED UP TA DEAL WITH THIS GUY.
JUDE AIN'T SOME GENIE YOU CAN JUST COMMAND.
INTERESTING CHOICE OF METAPHOR, BEN. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I INTEND TO DO. I'M GOING TO PUT JUDE IN A BOTTLE.
I ORIGINALLY BUILT THIS TO ACT AS A SORT OF ARTIFICIAL INVISIBLE SHIELD FOR SUSAN.
IT SHOULD TRAP JUDE UNTIL WE CAN MOVE HIM TO PERMANENT CONTAINMENT IN THE CASTLE--
WHERE YOUR SYNTHESIS OF JUDE'S ABILITIES CAN BEGIN AND YOU CAN DEVISE A TOOL TO DO WHAT JUDE'S TOUCH DOES.
EXACTLY, MAR-VELL...

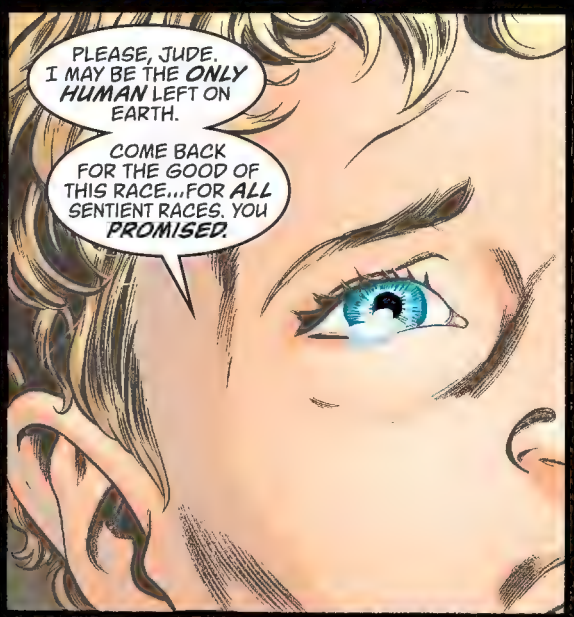

NOW, IF WE COULD HAVE THE DAREDEVILS FORM A CIRCLE AROUND JUDE...
WHAT'S WITH HIM?
I HAVE NO IDEA. WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM? DON'T YOU WANT TO DIE?
WE CAN'T DIE...AND I'M TIRED OF PRETENDING LIKE WE CAN...
LISTEN TO HIM TALK LIKE HE'S BETTER THAN US.
EXCUSE ME, GENTLEMEN. WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS. THERE ARE THOUSANDS THAT ARE SUFFERING.
I DIDN'T ASK YOU TO FORM A CIRCLE SO YOU WOULD BE THE FIRST TO DIE, BUT TO CALCULATE THE RADIUS NECESSARY FOR THE FORCE FIELD'S EXPANSION.
SO NOW IT'S TIME TO BEG JUDE FOR HIS RETURN.
AS I UNDERSTAND IT, BEGGING REQUIRES AN ACT OF CONTRITION. ON YOUR KNEES, GENTLEMEN.
JUDE? CAN YA HEAR ME? WE NEED YA. YA ONCE SAID THAT YOU'D COME BACK WHEN WE NEEDED YA, JUDE.
YA SAID THAT WHEN MANKIND NEEDED YA, YA'D BE HERE. CAN'T YA HEAR ME?
NOTHIN', STRETCH.
PERHAPS YOU'RE RIGHT, BEN. PERHAPS HE CAN'T HEAR YOU. BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT HUMAN ANYMORE.
BUT I AM.


I DON'T HAVE TO BE ON MY KNEES FOR THIS... THIS IS ABOUT THE HEART.

I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN DO THIS.
JUDE...I BELIEVE YOU ARE FROM THE FIRST UNIVERSE, ONE OF THE ANCIENT BEINGS.
I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT THE REASON WE ARE COMING TO YOU IS MY FAULT AND MINE ALONE.

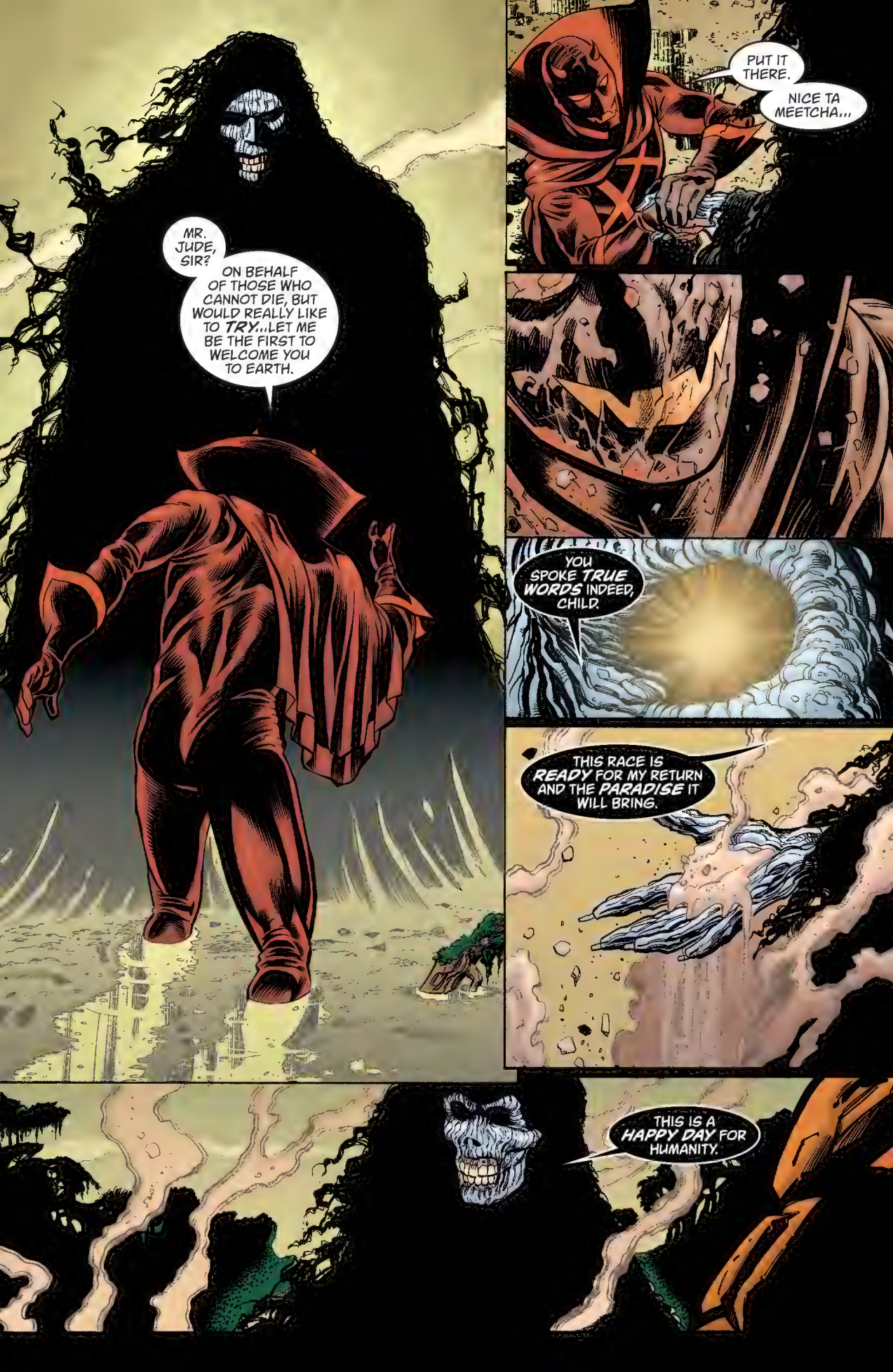
TO RESCUE THE AFTERLIVES OF MANKIND, I HELPED DESTROY PART OF THE FORCE THAT YOU ARE A PART OF...PART OF THE FORCE THAT WAS SHATTERED WHEN THE CURRENT UNIVERSE WAS BORN.
AS A RESULT, THE PART OF THAT FORCE MEANT FOR SENTIENT LIFE NO LONGER EXISTS. MANKIND NEEDS A NEW AMBASSADOR.


OR THOSE WHO WOULD HAVE DIED WILL CONTINUE SUFFERING FOR-EVER.
AND THOSE WHO ARE NOT SUFFERING, I FEAR WILL BECOME GHOULS... FREE TO DO WHAT THEY WISH WITHOUT COMPROMISE.


PLEASE, JUDE. I MAY BE THE ONLY HUMAN LEFT ON EARTH.
COME BACK FOR THE GOOD OF THIS RACE...FOR ALL SENTIENT RACES. YOU PROMISED.

WATCH OUT, MARV!
DAD? WHAT'S HAPPENING?
I DON'T WANT TO DIE!
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE MISSING, KID!
BUT OF COURSE, NEITHER DO WE...AT LEAST, NOT YET.

ARE YOU NOW, AT LAST, READY FOR THE SWEET GIFT I OFFER?
DO YOU TRULY HUNGER FOR THE GRACE ONLY I CAN GIVE? THE GIFT?


MR. JUDE, SIR?
ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO CANNOT DIE, BUT WOULD REALLY LIKE TO TRY...LET ME BE THE FIRST TO WELCOME YOU TO EARTH.
PUT IT THERE.
NICE TA MEETCHA...
YOU SPOKE TRUE WORDS INDEED, CHILD.
THIS RACE IS READY FOR MY RETURN AND THE PARADISE IT WILL BRING.
THIS IS A HAPPY DAY FOR HUMANITY.

IT'S A MIRACLE!
I SAW HIM FIRST, YOU WHORE!
PLEASE, JUDE! I WAS THE FIRST. THEY'RE JUST COPIES OF ME!
TOUCH ME NEXT. PLEASE, TOUCH ME!
NO, ME!
NO, I WAS THE FIRST. TAKE ME!
LIARS!
ME!
ME!
ME!
ME!
ME!
ME!
HEY, STRETCH! THIS AIN'T AS EASY AS IT LOOKS! HURRY UP, WILL YA?
JUST ANOTHER MOMENT, BEN...
...THERE.

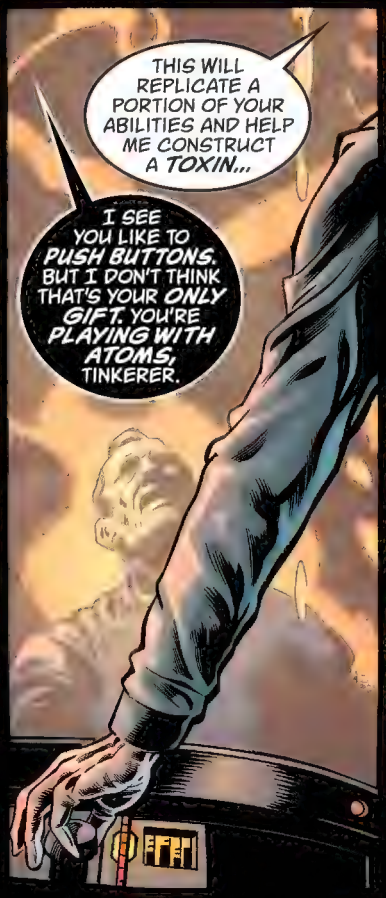
NO FAIR!
AW, COME ON!
JUST ONE MORE OF US, PLEASE?
I DON'T UNDERSTAND. YOU ASKED FOR ME TO COME BACK. WHAT IS WRONG?
DON'T YOU WANT ME HERE?
HAVE HANK BRING THE SHIP OVER AND PULL JUDE IN.
SHEESH!
YOU DID IT, REED. YOU DID IT.

"GENTLY, HANK. IT REQUIRES AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF ENERGY JUST TO HOLD DEATH, NOT TO MENTION TRANSPORT IT IN A GRAVI-BEAM."
"REED, DO YOU FEEL STRANGE ABOUT THIS? DO YOU THINK WE'VE DONE THE RIGHT THING?"
I DON'T HAVE THE LUXURY TO DOUBT MYSELF NOW, HANK. IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT.
THAT'S THE REASON WE SPENT SO MUCH TIME DISCUSSING THIS.
IT'S OUT OF MY HANDS.
I GOT IT.
YER CURT CONNERS, THE LIZARD! SPIDEY-MAN'S OLD ENEMY--MAYBE THAT'S WHY YA WANTED TA COME BACK HERE.
SEE THE OLD DIGS. SAY BYE TA THE BAYOU AN' ALL THAT.
YA FIGURED OUT HOW TA GROW YER ARM BACK--AN' EVERYTHING ELSE FER THAT MATTER--WITHOUT GETTIN' ALL SCALY.
YER CONNERS. I KNOW IT.
NO, FOR GOD'S SAKE! I'M NOT CURT CONNERS! WHY DO I HAVE TO BE ANYBODY?

"I'M SORRY, JUDE. BUT I'M NOT FREE..."
...NOT FREE TO ALLOW A FORCE AS POWERFUL AS YOURS TO MAKE THE DECISION OF WHO LIVES AND WHO DIES.
THEN WHO, RICHARDS? WHO WILL MAKE THAT DECISION?
YOU, RICHARDS? WILL THE DECISION BE YOURS?

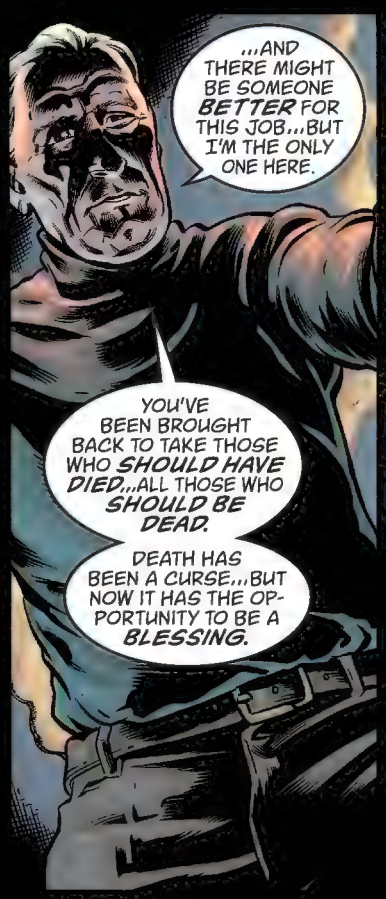
IT'S NOT LIKE THAT.
YES, IT IS.
YOU CALLED YOUR SON FRANKLIN AND MANIPULATED HIM INTO KILLING THE CELESTIAL SEED AT THE HEART OF THIS PLANET.
YOU'VE ALREADY MADE THE CHOICE YOU'LL ATTEMPT TO MAKE IN THE COMING DAYS.
...SUSAN.
HE'S TRYING TO TRICK YOU, REED. I DON'T KNOW HOW HE KNOWS WHAT HE KNOWS...
...BUT YOU'RE A GOOD MAN.
AND YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

IT'S GOING TO WORK, SUSAN. I CAN SYNTHESIZE AND REPLICATE IT... IT'S LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER COME INTO CONTACT WITH.
I COULD SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE STUDYING IT.
AS LONG AS I AM IN HERE, RICHARDS, THAT WILL BE A VERY LONG TIME.
HE'S NOT WORTH STAYING UP FOR. YOU'LL HAVE ALL THE TIME YOU WANT TO SPEAK TO HIM.
YOU DID IT. EVERYTHING YOU SET OUT TO DO, YOU MADE A REALITY. IT WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH.
COME TO BED, MR. RICHARDS.

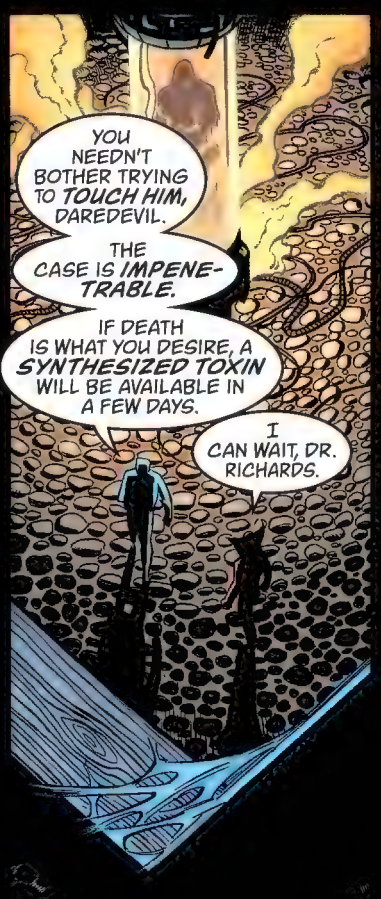

THIS WILL REPLICATE A PORTION OF YOUR ABILITIES AND HELP ME CONSTRUCT A TOXIN...
I SEE YOU LIKE TO PUSH BUTTONS, BUT I DON'T THINK THAT'S YOUR ONLY GIFT. YOU'RE PLAYING WITH ATOMS, TINKERER.

YOU SHOW ALL THE SKILL AND CONTROL OF A RETARDED SURGEON ON CRACK.
GO TO YOUR WIFE... HOLD HER IF YOU CAN. COMFORT HER WITH WORDS OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE THESE PAST FEW WEEKS.

YOU HAVE TO BE CONTROLLED...


...AND THERE MIGHT BE SOMEONE BETTER FOR THIS JOB...BUT I'M THE ONLY ONE HERE.
YOU'VE BEEN BROUGHT BACK TO TAKE THOSE WHO SHOULD HAVE DIED...ALL THOSE WHO SHOULD BE DEAD.
DEATH HAS BEEN A CURSE...BUT NOW IT HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE A BLESSING.

WE'LL CONTINUE IN THE MORNING.


YOU NEEDN'T BOTHER TRYING TO TOUCH HIM, DAREDEVIL.
THE CASE IS IMPENETRABLE.
IF DEATH IS WHAT YOU DESIRE, A SYNTHESIZED TOXIN WILL BE AVAILABLE IN A FEW DAYS.
I CAN WAIT, DR. RICHARDS.

I THINK I PREFERRED YOU WITH A WOMAN'S FACE.

THEN AGAIN, I'VE ALWAYS BEEN PARTIAL TO MASKS AND DECEPTIONS.

YOU ARE NOT WHO YOU PRETEND TO BE?
YOU DO NOT WANT TO DIE?

NO. AND YOU ARE RIGHT. I AM NOT WHO I PRETEND TO BE.

I WAS A FRIEND TO YOUR PREDECESSOR...SORT OF A FATHER FIGURE.
AND I CAN HELP YOU.

I HAVE ALREADY WALKED IN YOUR REALM, JUDE...
...AND I BELIEVE YOU WILL BE SADDENED TO HEAR THAT THESE HEROES WHO CAGE YOU ARE DOING FAR MORE THAN JUST THAT.
NOT ONLY DO THEY CONTROL YOU, BUT THEY HAVE DIMINISHED THE POWER OF YOUR REALM.
MANY OF THOSE WHO SHOULD BE IN YOUR REALM HAVE BEEN RESCUED FROM IT.
THEY NOW LIVE AGAIN IN A PLACE CALLED THE PARADISE, A PLACE RESIDING IN THE NEGATIVE ZONE, HAVING ESCAPED THROUGH THE DEATH OF YOUR PRE-DECESSOR.
I CAN HELP YOU BE ALL YOU CAN BE.
WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE?

INITIALLY, THERE IS VERY LITTLE I CAN DO, SAVE GUIDE YOU AND MAKE A FEW SUGGESTIONS...
...BUT YOU WON'T BE TRAPPED FOR MUCH LONGER. THAT IS MY PROMISE.
AND WHEN YOU ARE FREE AT LAST, I ASK ONLY THAT YOU DO WHAT YOU WERE FIRST BROUGHT BACK TO DO--TAKE THE LIVES OF ALL THOSE WHO SHOULD ALREADY BE DEAD.
BUT OF COURSE, THERE'S ONE MORE PERSON YOU SHOULD ADD TO THIS LIST, ONE MORE BEING WHO SHOULD NOW BE WALKING IN YOUR REALM, BUT WHO ESCAPED IT.
HER NAME IS SUSAN RICHARDS.

CHAPTER SIX

"Why did you bring the Heralds to this Earth, Aaron? Sure, you promised them knowledge in exchange for being your messengers, but there's another reason. Why mix the alternate reality heroes with our own counterparts...*here,* of all places, where the Celestial seed at the core of the planet has already been put to death?"

"Because if I'm understanding everything you're telling me, Kyle, this is all much larger than the Celestials; it's bigger than warning worlds of the Celestial egg that they've become.

"I've given the Heralds access to our Earth and our people because they will meet them one day in the Realm of the Dead...they will be joined to them there. That is what you are telling me, isn't it? That the Realm of the Dead is not an alternate world, not another timeline created by Mephisto. It's something created by these beings, the Elders, who are older even than our understanding of matter and atomic structure.

"Every new timeline splinters us, breaks our possibilities down into concrete realities. And those possibilities are being reassembled in the Realm of the Dead as every hero perishes in their own reality.

"Death's Realm is a collecting pool, isn't it, Kyle? It's a place where the souls of heroes and villains alike go until all their various alternate timeline forms can be recombined into one pure form once again. These pure forms then become the stuff that will be used to reassemble the original cosmos by the Elders of the Universe."

"You are absolutely right, Aaron. Though even what we will become then is hidden to me. My suspicion is that we will lose all sense of individuality, but I cannot be certain."

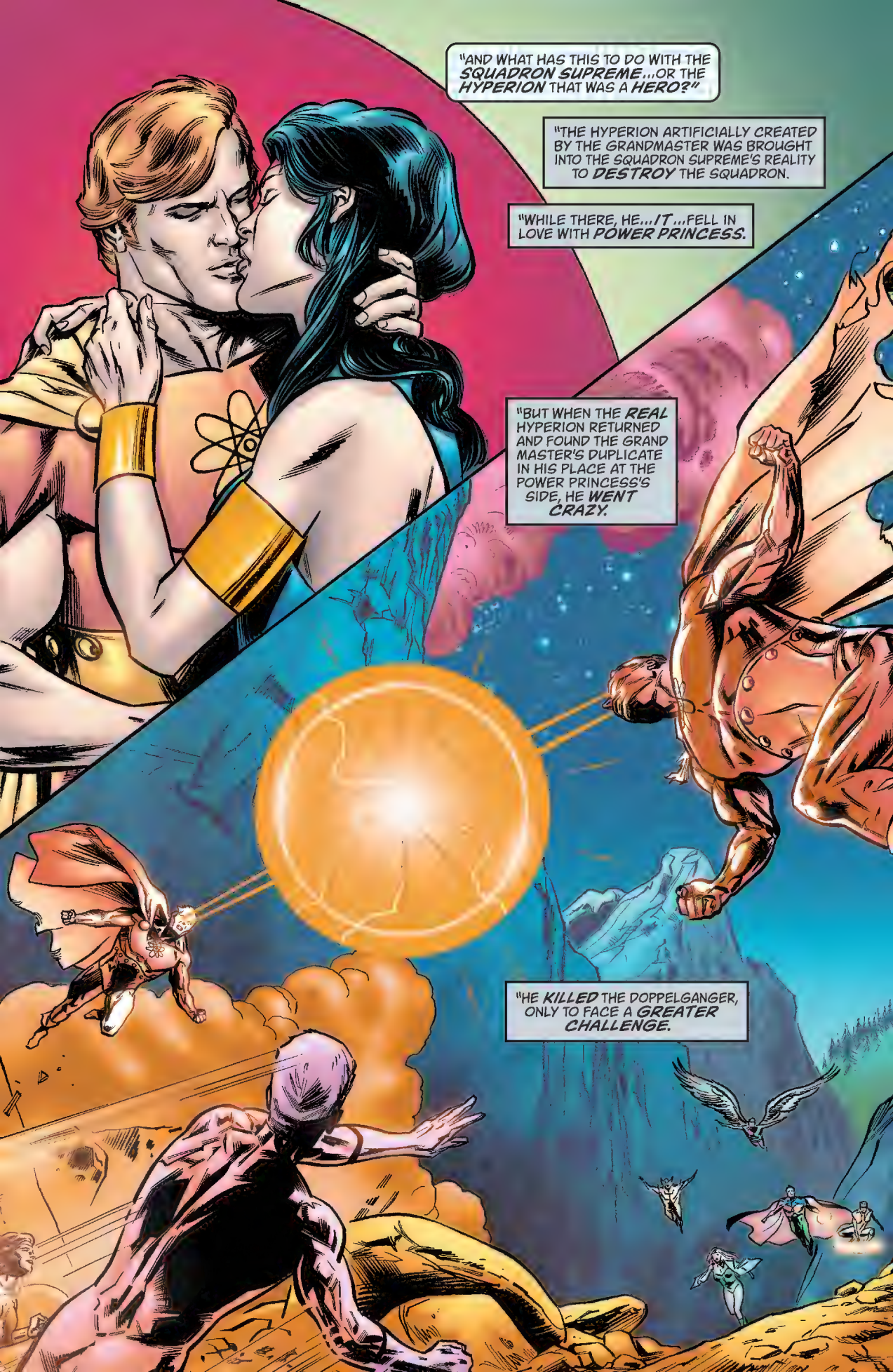
"Then the Elders of the Universe, the beings who created the Realm of the Dead, are just as manipulative as the Celestials? They care nothing for us. We are merely the means to their end."

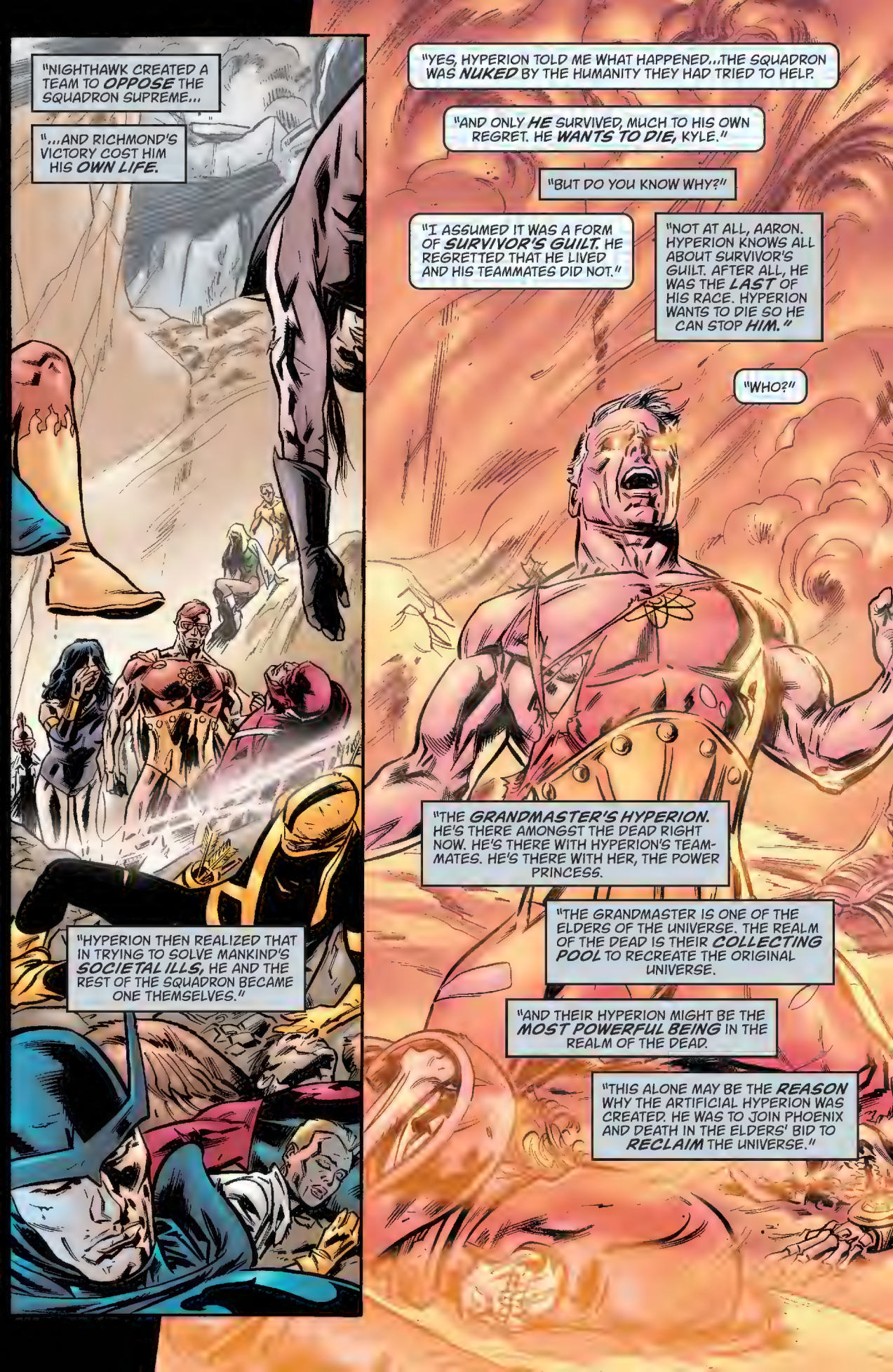
"Yes, Aaron. That is the problem we face. Though I can think of one member of your team who does not fit within the Elders' framework for reassembling the universe that existed before this one."

"Who?"

"Hyperion."

"LET ME EXPLAIN BY FIRST SPEAKING ABOUT MY ALTERNATE WORLD COUNTERPART, KYLE RICHMOND, FROM THE SAME REALITY THAT HYPERION COMES FROM.
"ON OUR WORLD, THE SQUADRON SUPREME WAS A TEAM OF VILLAINS--SUPER-POWERED CRIMINALS.
"BUT ON HYPERION'S WORLD, THEY WERE HEROES, A LEAGUE DEDICATED TO THE CAUSE OF JUSTICE.
"EVERYONE LOVED THEM, WITH KYLE RICHMOND BEING THE ONLY DISSENTER TO THEIR POPULARITY. SO MUCH SO THAT HE PLANNED TO ASSASSINATE HIS TEAMMATE, HYPERION."
"WHY, KYLE?"
"BECAUSE, AARON, THERE CAME A DAY WHEN THE SQUADRON SUPREME UNMASKED THEMSELVES AND CHOSE TO SOLVE HUMANITY'S SINS WITH THEIR OWN SUPER POWERS.
"HUNGER.
"CRIME.
"WAR.
"POVERTY.
"DISEASE.
"SOCIAL CLASS.
"THE ENVIRONMENT.
"THEIR ATTEMPT TO SOLVE SOCIETY'S ILLS WAS SOMETHING NIGHTHAWK COULD NOT ALLOW."
"WHY? BECAUSE NIGHTHAWK THOUGHT THESE WERE PROBLEMS FOR MANKIND TO SOLVE ON ITS OWN?"
"THAT'S CERTAINLY WHAT HE ARGUED WITH HYPERION.
"BUT THE TRUTH WAS THAT NIGHTHAWK WAS CONVINCED THAT NO EXTERNAL FORCE COULD SOLVE AN INTERNAL PREDISPOSITION TOWARDS CREATING THESE PROBLEMS.
"HE BELIEVED THAT THERE WAS A REASON FOR THESE SOCIETAL ILLS, AND NO AMOUNT OF SUPERHUMAN CONTROL COULD SOLVE THEM.
"THE REAL PROBLEM, THOUGH, WAS SOMETHING AT HUMANITY'S CORE."
"THESE EVENTS WERE REVEALED TO CAPTAIN AMERICA WHEN NIGHTHAWK CAME TO THIS REALITY IN SEARCH OF ALLIES...SO WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH HYPERION AND MY HERALDS?"
"ONE OF THE ELDERS OF THE UNIVERSE, THE GRANDMASTER, CREATED HIS OWN HYPERION OUT OF STATIC INTERDIMENSIONAL MATTER TO FIGHT AND KILL ON HIS BEHALF."
"WHY?"
"BECAUSE OF HOW POWERFUL HYPERION WAS. HOW INSPIRING HE COULD BE.
"THINK ABOUT IT, AARON. THE SQUADRON SUPREME ASIDE, HYPERION WAS ABLE TO CONVINCE AN ENTIRE WORLD TO TRUST HIM TO SOLVE THEIR GREATEST VICES.
"IT'S ONLY BECAUSE HE WAS A VILLAIN ON OUR WORLD THAT HE DIDN'T RISE TO BECOME OUR GREATEST CHAMPION."


"AND WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH THE SQUADRON SUPREME...OR THE HYPERION THAT WAS A HERO?"
"THE HYPERION ARTIFICIALLY CREATED BY THE GRANDMASTER WAS BROUGHT INTO THE SQUADRON SUPREME'S REALITY TO DESTROY THE SQUADRON.
"WHILE THERE, HE...IT...FELL IN LOVE WITH POWER PRINCESS.
"BUT WHEN THE REAL HYPERION RETURNED AND FOUND THE GRAND MASTER'S DUPLICATE IN HIS PLACE AT THE POWER PRINCESS'S SIDE, HE WENT CRAZY.
"HE KILLED THE DOPPELGANGER, ONLY TO FACE A GREATER CHALLENGE.


"NIGHTHAWK CREATED A TEAM TO OPPOSE THE SQUADRON SUPREME...
"...AND RICHMOND'S VICTORY COST HIM HIS OWN LIFE.
"HYPERION THEN REALIZED THAT IN TRYING TO SOLVE MANKIND'S SOCIETAL ILLS, HE AND THE REST OF THE SQUADRON BECAME ONE THEMSELVES."
"YES, HYPERION TOLD ME WHAT HAPPENED...THE SQUADRON WAS NUKED BY THE HUMANITY THEY HAD TRIED TO HELP.
"AND ONLY HE SURVIVED, MUCH TO HIS OWN REGRET. HE WANTS TO DIE, KYLE."
"BUT DO YOU KNOW WHY?"
"I ASSUMED IT WAS A FORM OF SURVIVOR'S GUILT. HE REGRETTED THAT HE LIVED AND HIS TEAMMATES DID NOT."
"NOT AT ALL, AARON. HYPERION KNOWS ALL ABOUT SURVIVOR'S GUILT. AFTER ALL, HE WAS THE LAST OF HIS RACE. HYPERION WANTS TO DIE SO HE CAN STOP HIM."
"WHO?"
"THE GRANDMASTER'S HYPERION. HE'S THERE AMONGST THE DEAD RIGHT NOW. HE'S THERE WITH HYPERION'S TEAMMATES. HE'S THERE WITH HER, THE POWER PRINCESS.
"THE GRANDMASTER IS ONE OF THE ELDERS OF THE UNIVERSE. THE REALM OF THE DEAD IS THEIR COLLECTING POOL TO RECREATE THE ORIGINAL UNIVERSE.
"AND THEIR HYPERION MIGHT BE THE MOST POWERFUL BEING IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
"THIS ALONE MAY BE THE REASON WHY THE ARTIFICIAL HYPERION WAS CREATED. HE WAS TO JOIN PHOENIX AND DEATH IN THE ELDERS' BID TO RECLAIM THE UNIVERSE."

"DOES HYPERION KNOW ABOUT THE ELDERS' PLAN TO RECONSTRUCT THE ORIGINAL UNIVERSE FROM THOSE THAT DIE IN THIS ONE?"
"NO. BUT HYPERION IS ABOUT TO BE DRAWN INTO A WAR THAT MAY LEAD TO HIS HEART'S DESIRE.
"HE IS ABOUT TO ARRIVE IN NEW YORK, WHERE ALREADY THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY AND CERTAIN AMBASSADORS OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE PREPARE TO FACE OFF AGAINST EACH OTHER."
DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE HERE FOR REED RICHARDS!
WHY?
BECAUSE I'M GOING TO KILL RICHARDS!
WE CAN'T ALLOW YOU TO DO THAT.
AT LEAST NOT UNTIL RICHARDS ANSWERS A FEW QUESTIONS OF OURS.
STARHAWK? TAKE 'EM DOWN!
"THERE WAS A TIME, KYLE, BEFORE UATU BROUGHT ME HERE TO BECOME THE NEW WATCHER...
"...BEFORE THE WHOLE OF MANKIND WAS MUTATED AND THE CELESTIAL PLAN FOR EARTH WAS REVEALED... WHEN I LOOKED AT EVERYTHING AS IF IT WERE HAPPENING BY COINCIDENCE.
"THE BLISS OF IGNORANCE, A TIME BEFORE I COULD SEE HOW EVERYTHING WAS PART OF A GREAT DESIGN. JUST ONCE, KYLE, I'D LIKE TO SEE COINCIDENCE AT WORK ONCE AGAIN."
"THEN KEEP YOUR EYE UPON THE BAXTER BUILDING, AARON. FOR THE BATTLE BEING FOUGHT THERE THIS MOMENT WILL FORGE AN ARMY."

GET OFF ME! THE LONGER THIS HUMILIATION LASTS, THE LONGER YOU WILL DIE!
FOCUS ON THE BIG ONE!
FOOLS!
SHUT UP AND TELL ME WHERE RICHARDS IS!
WHAT HAVE YOU GOTTEN ME INTO THIS TIME, REED?
I KNOW YOU TOLD ME NOT TO USE THIS INDOORS, REED...
...BUT I CAN'T AFFORD THE TIME TO HOLLOW OUT ANOTHER HELMET IF THIS ONE CRACKS IN A FIGHT.

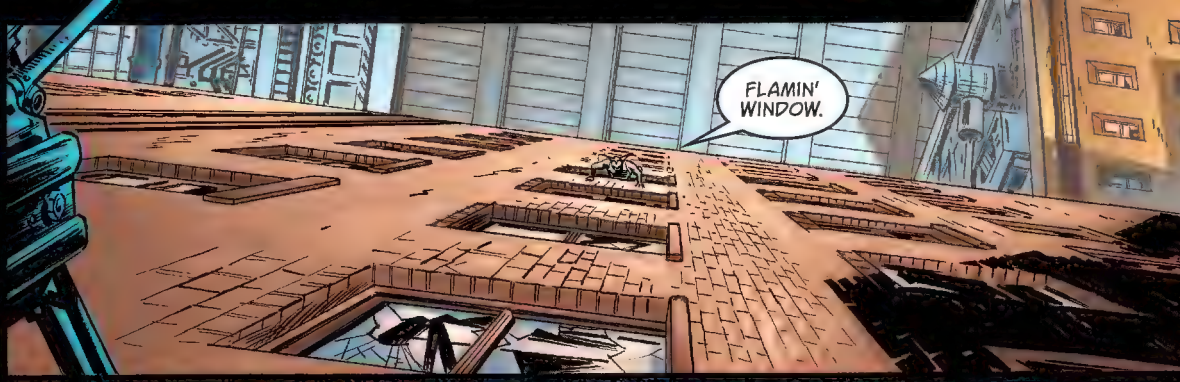
RICHARDS?
NO. NOT RICHARDS. I'M REDWING.

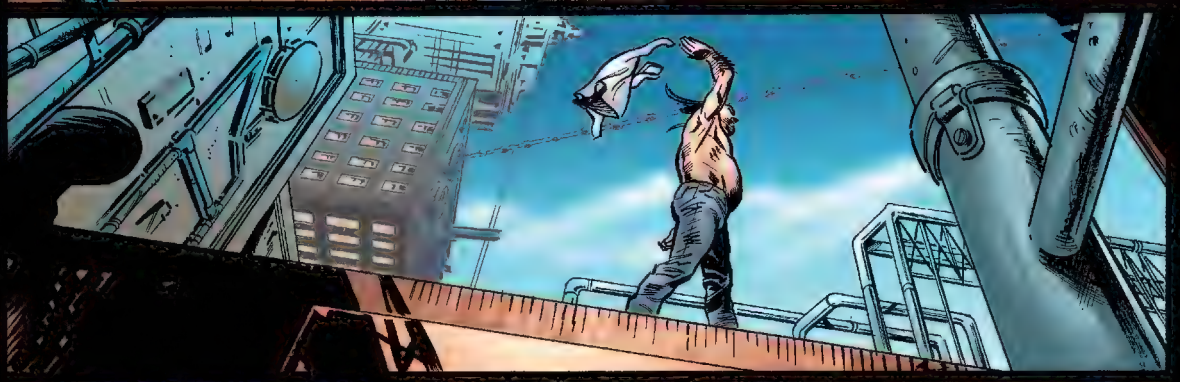
REMARKABLE TRANSPORTATION DEVICE. IT REALLY IS AMAZING.
GREAT. OF ALL THE "FAMILY MEMBERS" TO GET STUCK WITH, I GET MR. WIZARD.
YOU SAID IT, 'PUTER.
I DIDN'T HEAR ANYTHING.
SO, LOGAN...YOU'RE GOING TO TALK TO THE OTHER YOU AND WE'RE SUPPOSED TO JUST SIT HERE?
SOMETHIN' LIKE THAT.
YOU SMELL SOMETHING, WALTER?
THIS IS NO TIME TO THINK ABOUT YOUR STOMACH, MAC.
NO...HE'S RIGHT.
THAT'S REDWING... WYATT WINGFOOT, ACTUALLY.
YOU BETTER RESCUE HIM, ARNO.
FINALLY, A LITTLE ACTION!

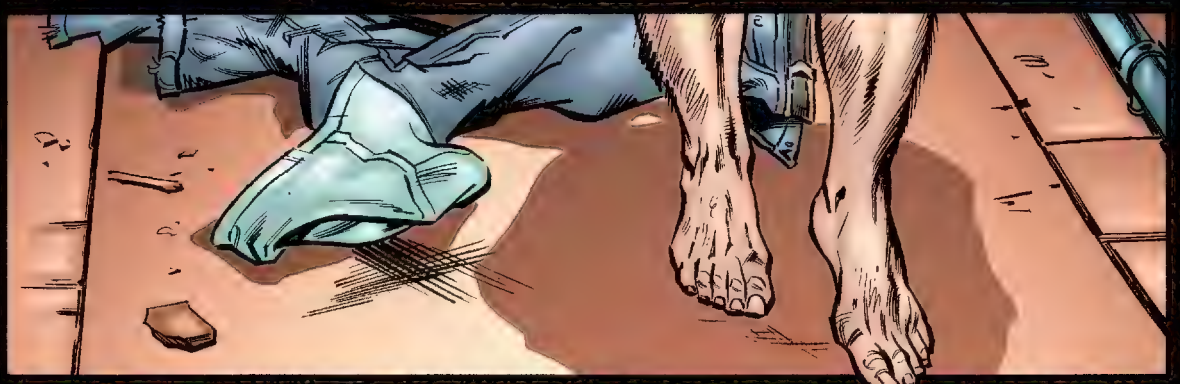
"KYLE...WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE LOGAN OF OUR WORLD WHEN HE LEARNS THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS ORIGIN?"
"WHAT WILL HAPPEN, AARON?"
"YES, WILL HE LOSE WEIGHT AND REJOIN THE SUPER HERO COMMUNITY AS PETER PARKER DID?"
"NO."
THERE YOU ARE.
AW, HELL! AS IF LIVIN' WITH MYSELF WASN'T BAD ENOUGH ALREADY.
LOOK, IF I WERE YOU, I WOULDN'T WANT ME HERE, EITHER.
BUT I FOUND OUT ABOUT WHO I AM...WHO WE ARE.
WHERE WE COME FROM.
YEAH... WELL, LET ME TELL YA WHERE YOU CAN GO.
YA CAN'T IGNORE THIS!
AN' ONE WAY OR ANOTHER YER GONNA SOBER UP.
I'M ALL WET!
RELAX, YOU'LL HEAL. REMEMBER YOUR "MUTANT" POWER?
'CEPT, IT AIN'T A MUTANT POWER AT ALL. YER NOT EVEN A MUTANT.

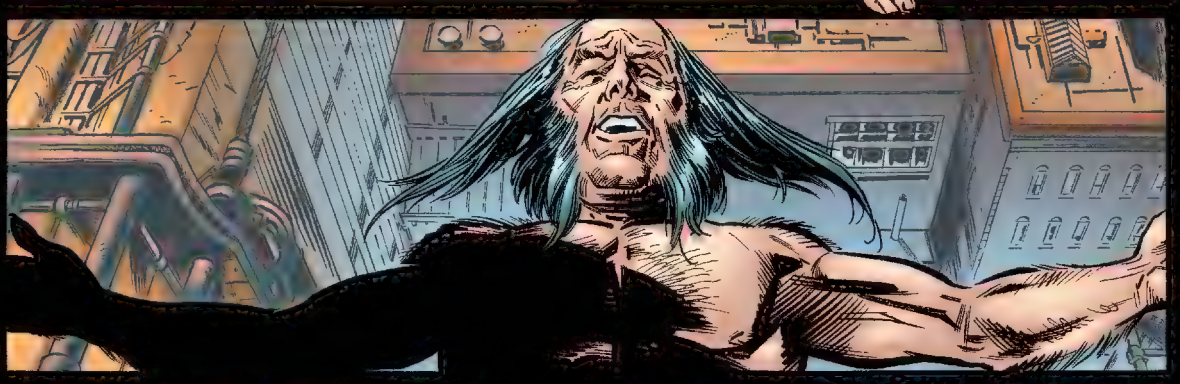
BEFORE FLAMIN' WEAPON X, BEFORE SOME FAMILY IN A HILLTOP MANSION TOOK YOU IN...
...BEFORE ALPHA FLIGHT, BEFORE THE X-MEN, BEFORE ANY OF THAT CRAP...
...YOU HAD NO ASPIRATION TA BE A MAN, AT ALL.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKIN' ABOUT? I'M A MAN!
NO, WE'RE NOT! NOT IN THE EXPECTED SENSE, I MEAN. AN' DRINKIN' MORE BREWSKIS AIN'T GONNA MAKE IT SO.
YA SEE, IT AIN'T LIKE WE'RE SOME KIND OF FLAMIN' MOWGLI LIKE WE ALWAYS FIGURED...
...LOST IN THE WILDERNESS, RAISED BY WOLVES AN' ALL THAT UNTIL WE WAS RESCUED BY CIVILIZATION!
IT'S MORE LIKE WE'RE THE WOLF THAT WAS RAISED BY HUMANS.
AN' WE'RE NOT ALONE. SASQUATCH, JOHN JAMESON, EVEN SABRETOOTH...
...WE'RE ALL PART OF A DIVERGENT GENETIC RACE THAT RAN PARALLEL TO HUMANITY. THAT'S WHY THERE ARE SO MANY LIKE US.
WE THOUGHT WE WERE MEN STRUGGLING WITH OUR BESTIAL SIDE. BUT IT'S THE OPPOSITE.
"HOW TA BE A MAN"...THAT WAS ALWAYS THE QUESTION. WHETHER WE KNEW WE WUZ ASKIN' IT OR NOT DOESN'T MATTER.
THE FACT WAS THAT NO MATTER WHERE WE WENT, WE SAW OTHER MEN, MEN WHO LED AN' WERE STRONG AN' WE WANTED WHAT THEY HAD. IF ONLY TO DEFINE US.
WHEN WE WERE RAISED IN THE MANSION, IT WAS THE GIRL.
WHEN WE WERE FOUND BY MAC AN' HEATHER, IT WAS HEATHER.
WHEN WE JOINED THE X-MEN, IT WAS...
...JEANNIE.
YA CAN KEEP ON PRETENDIN' TA BE A MAN...BUT FROM THE LOOK OF THINGS, YER ONLY BEIN' THE WORST KINDA ONE.
IT DOESN'T HAVE TA BE THIS WAY. YOU CAN BE FREE. BUT IT'S UP TA YOU WHETHER YA WANNA BE WHAT YA ARE OR NOT.

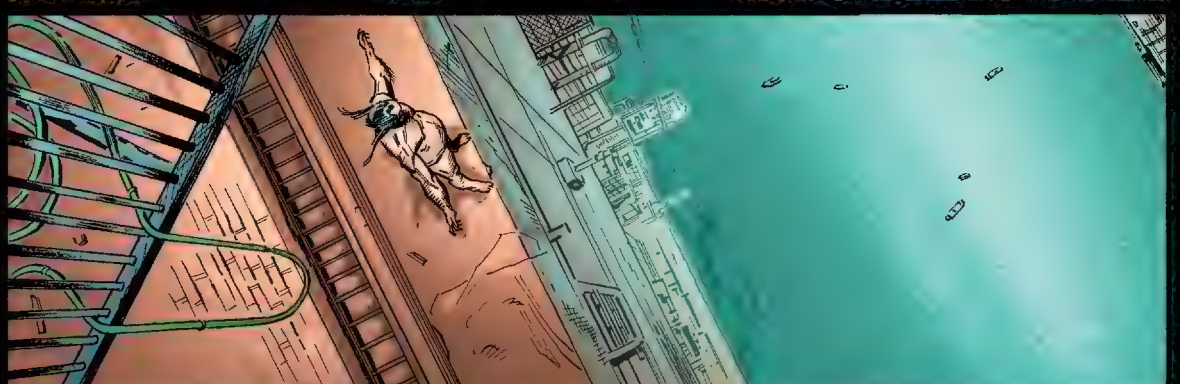
THOUGHT YA'D WANNA KNOW WHERE WE CAME FROM. NEVER SAID THE ANSWER WAS GONNA MAKE YA HAPPY.
FLAMIN' DOOR.
HA-HA-HEH-HA-HA-HEH-HA-HA-HA!


FLAMIN' WINDOW.

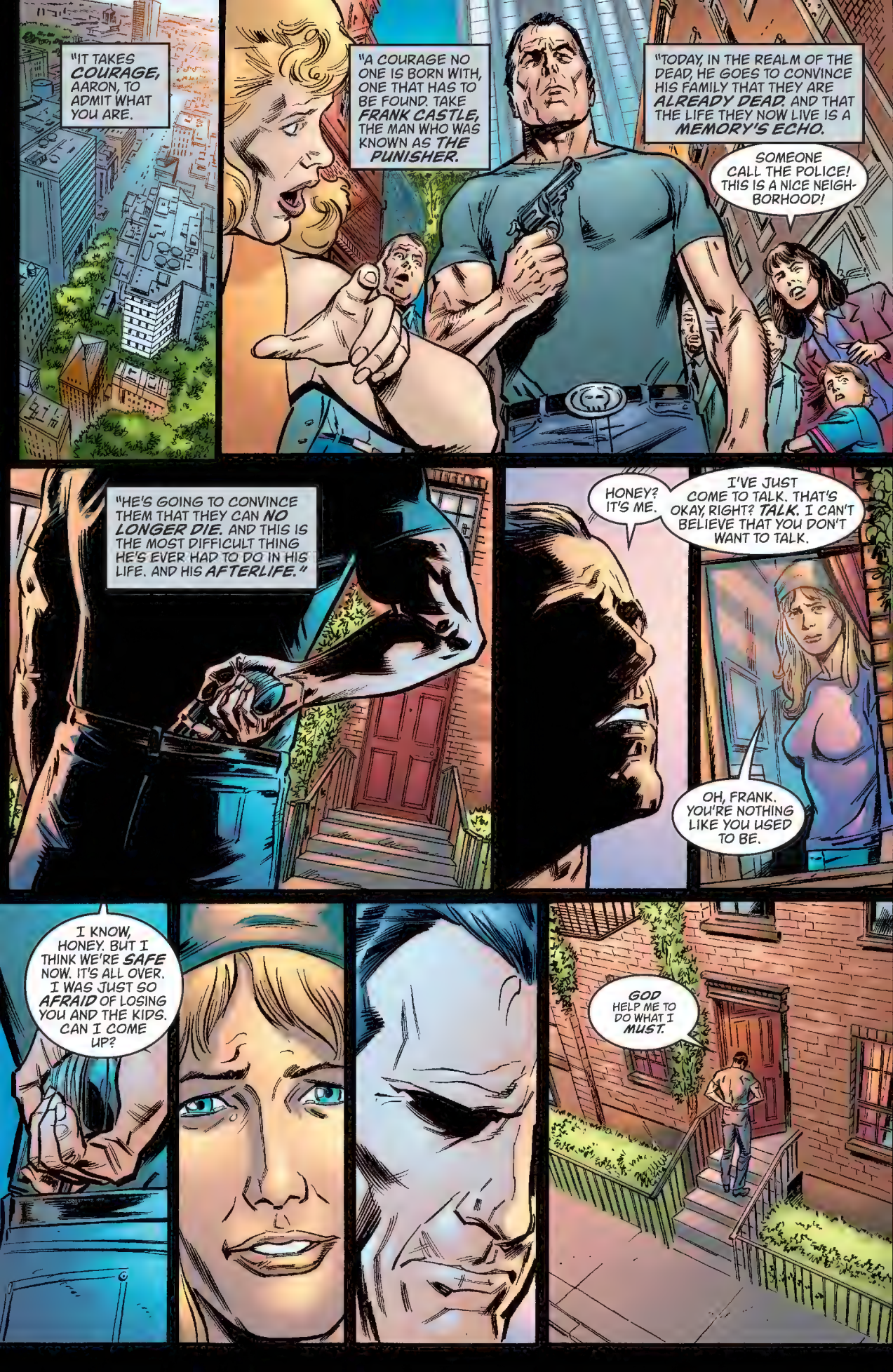








"HE DIDN'T KILL HIMSELF, THEN. SO WHERE'S HE GOING, KYLE?"
"AWAY FROM THE THINGS OF MAN, AARON. NOW THAT HE REMEMBERS WHERE IT IS, HE'S FINALLY GOING HOME."


"IT TAKES COURAGE, AARON, TO ADMIT WHAT YOU ARE.
"A COURAGE NO ONE IS BORN WITH, ONE THAT HAS TO BE FOUND. TAKE FRANK CASTLE, THE MAN WHO WAS KNOWN AS THE PUNISHER.
"TODAY, IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD, HE GOES TO CONVINCE HIS FAMILY THAT THEY ARE ALREADY DEAD, AND THAT THE LIFE THEY NOW LIVE IS A MEMORY'S ECHO.
SOMEONE CALL THE POLICE! THIS IS A NICE NEIGHBORHOOD!
"HE'S GOING TO CONVINCE THEM THAT THEY CAN NO LONGER DIE. AND THIS IS THE MOST DIFFICULT THING HE'S EVER HAD TO DO IN HIS LIFE. AND HIS AFTERLIFE."
HONEY? IT'S ME.
I'VE JUST COME TO TALK. THAT'S OKAY, RIGHT? TALK. I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO TALK.
OH, FRANK. YOU'RE NOTHING LIKE YOU USED TO BE.
I KNOW, HONEY. BUT I THINK WE'RE SAFE NOW. IT'S ALL OVER. I WAS JUST SO AFRAID OF LOSING YOU AND THE KIDS. CAN I COME UP?
GOD HELP ME TO DO WHAT I MUST.

HI, HONEY.
FRANK. WE'VE MISSED YOU SO MUCH. KIDS, LOOK...IT'S DADDY.
FRANK? IS THAT A GUN?
I'M SORRY IT HAS TO BE THIS WAY, HONEY. I HAVE TO SHOW YOU THAT YOU CAN'T DIE. I LOVE YOU TOO MUCH TO LEAVE YOU HERE. I HAVE TO SHOW YOU THE TRUTH.
THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I KNOW HOW.
NO, FRANK. PLEASE, NO. THE CHILDREN!
GOD, FRANK, NOOOOOO!!
BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

"THAT WAS TERRIBLE, KYLE. HOW CAN YOU EVEN TELL ME THINGS LIKE THAT?"
"BECAUSE DEATH ISN'T WHAT WE EXPECT. AND NEITHER IS LIFE.
"LOOK AT LOGAN, FOR INSTANCE."
OH, MAN.
AN' THESE ARE THE PEOPLE I'VE SPENT THE BETTER PART OF MY LIFE TRYIN' TA BE LIKE.
I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR AND TURN AROUND SLOWLY, BUNKY. YOUR KIND NEVER DOES.
BUT YOU SHOULD. IT'LL MAKE THIS A WHOLE LOT QUICKER.
I GOT YER SCENT ALREADY, OFFICER PARKER.
I'M NOT THE PROBLEM HERE. YOU MUTANTS ARE.
OH-- IT'S YOU, LOGAN.
WE'VE BEEN GETTING REPORTS ALL DAY OF PROBLEMS AT THE BAXTER BUILDING.
A BUNCH OF TOURISTS RAN OUT OF THERE SCREAMING ABOUT INVADERS THAT CAME OUT OF THE WALL.
YOU SHOULD TAKE A LOOK FOR YOURSELF, THEN.
AND THEY USED TO CALL ME A MENACE.
I'LL SAY IT FOR YOU, CAGE.
SWEET CHRISTMAS.

HANDS IN THE AIR! THIS IS A STICK-UP!
OH, DAD... THAT'S SO BAD.
NEW YORK HAS ENOUGH PROBLEMS!
LAST THING WE NEED IS ANOTHER SKULL AFFAIR! I WANT TO KNOW NOW, WHO OR WHAT CAUSED THIS THING?
AN' THEN I WANT TO SEE YOU ALL KISS AN' MAKE UP!
YOU LEARN THIS METHOD BACK WHEN YOU WERE IN PRISON, SGT. CAGE?
SHUT UP. OR YOU'RE BACK IN THE UNDERWEAR AND WE'RE SHOOTIN' AT YOU AGAIN.

I THINK THAT I AM THE CAUSE OF THIS, SGT. CAGE. OF COURSE, THAT'S ONLY AN EDUCATED CONSIDERATION OF PROBABILITY.
BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT I CAN'T IMAGINE WHY THESE AMBASSADORS FROM THE NEGATIVE ZONE HAVE COME TO EARTH, IF NOT TO SPEAK TO ME.
ANNIHILUS. WHY HAVE YOU COME?
YOU LIED WHEN YOU SAID YOU WOULD LEAVE US ALONE, RICHARDS. YOU ARE DESTROYING THE NEGATIVE ZONE!
HOW AM I DESTROYING THE NEGATIVE ZONE?
THE ANTI-MATTER HEART IS GROWING, ENVELOPING WHOLE WORLDS AND PEOPLES AS IT OVERWHELMS OUR UNIVERSE!
AND WHY HAVE YOU COME, GUARDIANS?
WE NEED YOU TO SYNTHESIZE SOMETHING LIKE THE TERRIGEN MISTS SO THAT WE CAN EMPOWER AN UNMUTATED HUMANITY IN THE FUTURE TO FIGHT OFF AN ALIEN INVASION FROM THE BADDOON.
DON'T LOOK AT ME, REED. THEY WERE FIGHTING BEFORE I GOT HERE.
LET THEM GO, CAGE, I'LL TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.
VANCE--LEAVE YOUR SHIP HERE. X-51'S HERALDS CAN SEE TO YOUR TRANSPORTATION TO MY HOME IN LATVERIA.
SORRY ABOUT THE TROUBLE, OFFICERS.
I DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE DESTRUCTION, YOU UNDERSTAND...
...BUT DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH PAPERWORK I'M GOING TO HAVE TO FILL OUT?
AW, NUTS.

WHAT DO YOU THINK, REED?
WELL, THE CANCER AT THE HEART OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE IS OBVIOUSLY THE PARADISE THAT SCOTT KEEPS TALKING ABOUT, MAR-VELL.
BUT, REED, THIS RAISES A NEW PROBLEM, DOESN'T IT?
THE PARADISE GROWS WITH EACH NEW SOUL THAT ENTERS IT.
YES IT DOES.
WE'VE GONE TO ALL THE TROUBLE OF SYNTHESIZING A WAY TO IGNITE THE MOLECULAR BREAKDOWN FROM JUDE, THE ENTROPIC MAN...
...AND END THE SUFFERING OF OUR FELLOW MEN WHO SHOULD HAVE DIED.
BUT NOW, USING THIS DEVICE WILL ADD TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THOSE WHO MAKE THEIR HOME IN THE NEGATIVE ZONE.

HELLO, JUDE.
YOU CAN'T KEEP ME A PRISONER HERE FOREVER, RICHARDS. YOU ASKED FOR MY RETURN.
IF YOU DON'T FREE ME TO PASS MY BLESSING TO HUMANITY, YOU WILL BE VERY, VERY SORRY INDEED. YOU HAVE MY WORD ON THIS.
THE WORD OF OBLIVION.
"Death is a safety-device because, once Man has fallen, natural immortality would be the one utterly hopeless destiny for him." — C.S. Lewis

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER SIX

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

IRON MAIDEN

"Karen?"

"Who is that?"

"It's me, Aaron. The Watchman from the moon."

"Oh, there you are. Hi."

"Hi?"

"What's the matter?"

"Well, you don't seem surprised to see me. It's like you were expecting a giant black rectangle to appear in front of you and a see-through robot to walk out of it and greet you."

"Nathan told me you'd be coming. I expected you. "

"Oh."

"I keep forgetting about Nathan Summers. I keep forgetting to look below the surface."

"Ha."

"It's my job now, you know, to keep a record of the events of super humanity — and so your rescue mission is very important to me. When are you planning to leave?"

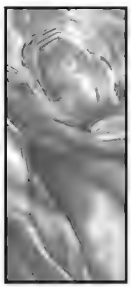
"Shortly. According to the logs on the Inhuman Royal Family's Starship, the Eternals they found encased in vibranium are easily years from here. It's going to be a while before we return… with them or without."

"You're taking the Iron Avengers with you. Are you concerned with leaving Earth without their continued defense?"

"No. If I learned anything from my time in Sentinel City, it's that everything can be rebuilt. If Earth requires another team of Iron Avengers, the Black Knight will make certain they are constructed according to whatever needs that arise."

"Assuming, of course, there is the luxury of time on humanity's side."

"Well, yes, there is that."



"It's interesting, isn't it, that you now play such a pivotal role in this generation of heroes. Not only were you controlled by the Skull and part of his original attempts to take control of Earth, but your involvement with Magneto and then the further mutated Nathan Summers made it possible for you to help save Earth and restore the balance of vibranium at the core."

"I think you're giving me too much credit, Aaron. Nathan — maybe you know him more as the X-Man Cable — told me about my powers. He helped me understand what was needed to save the Earth. And you know that my involvement with the Skull was not my choice at all."

"Yes, but…"

"You're treating this as if it were a series of events, a number of stories to be catalogued and selected from one at a time. You're wrong about that. It's one story. Or maybe not a story at all. It's more of a maze. That's how you need to look at it. It's a puzzle filled with pieces. The event that gave the Skull his power wiped out almost every telepathic mutant on Earth, except for Cable, who escaped into the Earth. The Skull's rise to power led me to Cable, which led me to find a way to save the Earth in exchange for a way to now save Cable."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Only that for some reason, the secrets of how and why things are the way they are desire to be known. They want to be found out."

"I'm not certain I can accept such a passive outlook."

"It's not passive. It's… I don't know, a recognition of something beyond what we can see, wanting to be seen."

"But you're suggesting something almost sentient to what has always been considered inanimate."

"I know."

"But…"

"You ask me how I can leave Earth defenseless, well, with fewer defenders than it has now in light of future potential threats. But really, all I'm doing is paying a debt to someone who saved us all from a real threat already. You know how many heroes are still on Earth, Aaron. You know that should something happen, and it seems like something always happens, they will be ready to face it. Are you really suggesting that we don't help someone in need because of what might happen? Are you really saying we shouldn't help because of the risk to others? How can we see a need and not do anything about it?"

"Ha. My irony button just got pushed. We… can't, of course. The problem with being a thinking computer is that you never get a sense of déjà vu. You know exactly what you've heard before, and when you heard it. I said very close to those very words to the Watcher before me shortly after Earth was saved from the Celestials. Except then, I called the unwillingness to do something in light of apparent need: evil."

"Have you ever thought, Aaron, about how many watchmen there are for this planet? Reed Richards alone, my former boss, has been, if anything, Earth's greatest human watchman. No offense. The question is whether nature raises up champions."

"I understand."

"And Cable himself called me to where he was at the bottom of the world, not only to ask for my help, but also to ensure that Earth be saved in the aftermath of its re-polarization. And what of Stephen Strange? Didn't he guard this planet from supernatural invasion attempts time and time again? What about any of the other heroes? What about Captain Mar-Vell?"

"There is much about Mar-Vell I am uncertain about, Karen."

"Regardless, and I don't want to damn you with insignificance, but there are things that cannot be seen from the moon. Things below the surface. Things we cannot know because we don't know enough to even look for them."

"That's been confirmed time and time again."

"To me as well. I once tried to help Reed Richards fuel this world with vibranium without even asking why it was here, why it had dropped from the sky to Earth. I just took it on faith, I suppose, that it was here for us to use, without realizing that it was, to a degree, here from beings that were instead using us. Gods who cared nothing for us."

"We showed them."

"Yes, yes we did. Do you know when they'll return to destroy us completely?"

"… no…"

"I can't imagine they won't return."

"Me neither."

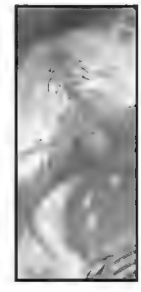
"Cable said that it was only a matter of time. Once we could have satisfied ourselves with the knowledge that we would be dead and buried by the time they returned. That such problems could be left for future, better generations to solve just as our generation was left with the legacies, for good or bad, of those ages that came before us. But that's not the case anymore, is it, Aaron? We're the next generation and the one after that. There will be no new generations after this one. In time, tomorrow will become like yesterday. And the day after that will hold no new secrets. No new youth. I promised Cable I would help him. But if we are to have any hope at all, we need the Eternals back just to learn how to live in light of immortality."

"Does Cable have any idea about what's going to happen?"

"No. He warns that unless something changes, what will happen will be the same as what's happened before. History will be repeated whether we like it or not. There's 'déjà vu' for you."

"Good luck, Karen."

"Thanks, Aaron. We are all going to need it. If you see Reed, let him know that I think he's right."



"About what?"

"Everything."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"An impasse."

"Is it, Aaron?"

"Of course it is, Kyle. If Reed Richards is going to end the suffering of mankind by introducing a surrogate Death to the world, it will be at the cost of the Negative Zone's population.

"Every new soul that dies may be added to the Paradise that now exists at the heart of the Negative Zone.

"An end to mankind's suffering adds to theirs."

"Yes, but—"

"There are no buts, Kyle. Who's to say how far the Paradise may expand? If it consumes the Negative Zone, what then? What's next? Earth? And what about *after* Earth? From what you said, every soul in the universe will go there once it dies. It's as if the living must now experience an eternity of suffering if only to protect the rest of the universe.

"It would have been better if the Celestial at the core had just been born, Kyle. It would have been better for everyone. Earth's heroes didn't save the planet. We wrestled with destiny, and destiny took the legs right out from under us.

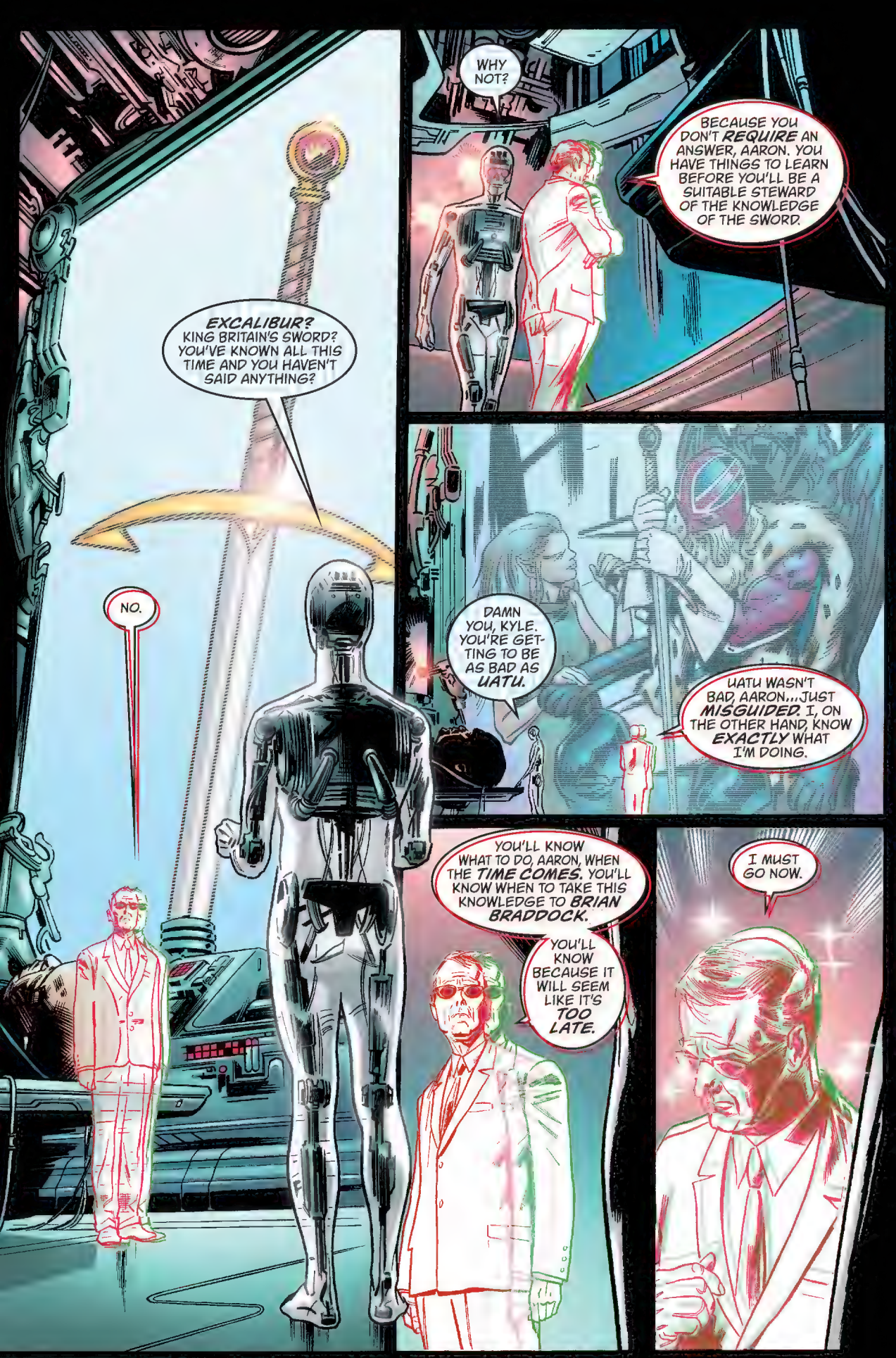
"To think we ever thought Death was an enemy. God knows how we're going to get out of this one, Kyle. God knows."

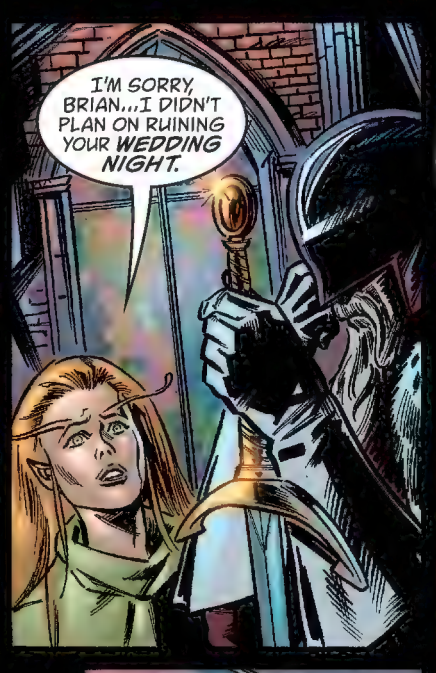
"I think you mean, *Mar-Vell* knows, Aaron. Mar-Vell knows how we're going to get out of this."

"That's the problem, Kyle. This is all Mar-Vell's fault."

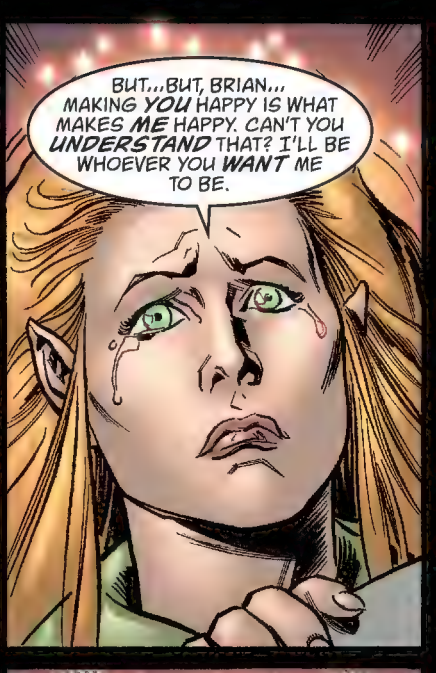
"THIS ISN'T OVER, AARON. NOR IS YOUR WORLD ON THE EDGE OF MOLECULAR ENTROPY. REMEMBER THAT.
"TWICE IN RECENT MEMORY, ALL SEEMED HOPELESS... BUT THERE IS TIME, AARON. DON'T FORGET WHAT YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN SAVED FROM.
"WE NOW KNOW THAT THERE EXIST ENEMIES OF THE CELESTIALS. GALACTUS...THE ELDERS OF THE UNIVERSE...
"...THE CELESTIAL MANIPULATION OF MANKIND HAS LED TO A SHIFT IN THE COSMIC BALANCE OF POWER, A SHIFT THE ELDERS ARE NOW TRYING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF."
"TRUE, KYLE, BUT IT'S NOT LIKE THE ELDERS ARE OUR FRIENDS OR ANYTHING.
"THEY JUST WANT TO BREAK US DOWN INTO THE BRICKS THEY NEED TO CREATE THEIR ORIGINAL UNIVERSE...THE ONE THAT EXISTED BEFORE OUR OWN.
"THEY'RE PLAYING DICE WITH US, KYLE. LOOK AT MEPHISTO...
"...HE'S JUST LIKE THE REST OF US. BUT OUR FEAR--MAYBE EVEN A FEAR INSPIRED BY THE HORROR OF THE CELESTIALS--CHANGED HIM INTO THE FATHER OF LIES, THE CREATOR OF THE MULTIVERSE."
"'FATHER OF LIES,' AARON? THAT'S ALMOST FUNNY...BUT HE IS A FATHER, OF SORTS.
"MEPHISTO WAS MERELY THE CELESTIALS' FIRST ATTEMPT AT MANIPULATING MANKIND. BEFORE THE DEVIANTS, BEFORE THE ETERNALS, BEFORE LAYING DORMANT SEEDS WITHIN PRIMITIVE MANKIND, THERE WAS MEPHISTO.
"WHEN THE FIRST TIME TRAVELLER, EMPOWERED BY THE ENIGMA FORCE, TRAVELED WITH HIS 'ARK' OF ALIEN RACES TO EARTH FROM THE FAR FUTURE, THEY ARRIVED TO FACE THESE EARLY REJECTIONS OF THE CELESTIALS.
"PRINCE WAYFINDER AND HIS CREW CREATED A POCKET REALITY TO ESCAPE INTO AND ESTABLISHED THE REALM OF SUB-ATOMICA."
"WHY WERE THE DEMONS REJECTED?"
"BECAUSE, AARON, THEY WERE TOO MUCH LIKE THIRD-TIER MUTATIONS...TOO QUICKLY SHAPED BY PRIMITIVE MAN.
"THE CELESTIALS CHOSE TO ALTER THEIR MANIPULATIONS BY CREATING A RACE THAT WOULD SHAPE EARLY HUMANITY'S SUPERSTITIONS, AS OPPOSED TO BEING SHAPED FROM THEM."
"SO MEPHISTO WAS THE CELESTIALS' MISTAKE?"
"EXACTLY, AARON. AND THUS DID GOD REJECT THE DEVIL.
"A DEVIL THAT NEEDED JUST A LITTLE INSPIRATION TO BECOME ALL THAT HE COULD.
"MEPHISTO FOUND THAT INSPIRATION IN PRINCE WAYFINDER.
"A DIFFERENT SEED WAS PLANTED THAT DAY... ONE THAT GREW OUT OF THE KNOWLEDGE THAT TIME MIGHT BE TRAVELED UPON LIKE A RIVER.
"AND THAT THERE WERE WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS THAT ONE COULD CREATE AND ESCAPE INTO, GIVEN THE POSSIBILITY."

"BUT HUMAN HISTORY IS A LONG TIME TO WAIT FOR THE DISCOVERY OF TIME TRAVEL TO BE MADE, AARON.
"MEPHISTO WANTED POWER, AND FOUND HIS FIRST REAL OPPORTUNITY IN A SMALL NORSE VILLAGE."
"YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT THE RACE OF ALIENS THAT WERE THIRD-TIER MUTATIONS FROM THEIR OWN WORLDS, RIGHT? YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT THE CREATION OF THOR AND ASGARD?"
"YES. MEPHISTO HELPED A YOUNG STORYTELLER, A MAN WHO EXPERIENCED REJECTION DUE TO A LAME LEG, TO FORM THESE ALIENS ACCORDING TO HIS FAVORITE MYTHS.
"LATER, MEPHISTO MANIPULATED DOCTOR DOOM INTO BELIEVING HE HAD THE KNOWLEDGE TO CREATE A TIME MACHINE...
"...BUT IN REALITY, IT WAS ALWAYS DOOM'S INVENTION, ALWAYS DOOM'S BRILLIANCE. MEPHISTO JUST TOOK CREDIT FOR IT."
"BUT YOU TOLD ME THAT DOOM WAS CURSED TO BE SUCCESSFUL, KYLE. ISN'T THAT THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH HIS MOTHER SOLD HIS SOUL?"
"YES, AARON. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN HE WOULDN'T HAVE BECOME A GREAT MAN ANYWAY. MEPHISTO TOOK ADVANTAGE OF HIS MOTHER'S FEAR, THAT'S ALL.
"AS HE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ALL OUR FEARS AND WEAKNESSES.
"AS HE ALWAYS DOES."
"DID MEPHISTO LEARN THESE FEARS THROUGH TIME TRAVEL, THROUGH REPEATED EXPERIENCE?"
"WEREN'T YOU LISTENING, AARON? HE'S NOT MEPHISTO BECAUSE HE IS, BUT BECAUSE OF HOW WE SEE HIM.
"THAT'S WHY HELL IS THE PLACE OF COWARDS, AARON. OUR FEARS GIVE HIM FORM. WE ARMOR HIM IN THEM. HE KNOWS HOW TO STRIKE AT US, BECAUSE WE HAVE CREATED A 'HIM' TO DO SO.
THAT'S WHY HE'S STILL MEPHISTO... EVEN IN LIGHT OF WHAT HAPPENED IN DEATH'S REALM, WE STILL BELIEVE IN HIM.
"WE FEAR OUR OWN MORTALITY AND BLAME MEPHISTO FOR IT, SO HE BECOMES A SORT OF FATHER OF DEATH.
"AND BECAUSE HE IS MOVED BY OUR FEARS AND NOT HIS OWN, HE FORGETS HOW FIGURATIVE SUCH A STATEMENT REALLY IS.
"BUT THOSE SAME FEARS THAT HAVE GIVEN HIM STRENGTH LOOK FORWARD WITH FAITH TO A DAY WHEN HE WILL BE JUDGED."
"YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT HIS ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE JUDGMENT...BY MAKING LINEAR TIME AN ENDLESS CYCLE OF ALTERNATE REALITIES, RIGHT?
"CAN IT END? CAN TIME BECOME LINEAR AGAIN?"
"IT CAN, AARON. BUT ONLY IF THE CYCLE IS BROKEN. AND THAT'S WHY MEPHISTO IS NOW ATTEMPTING TO RENDER ALL OF US INCAPABLE OF ACTION.
"BUT EITHER DEAD OR UNABLE TO STOP HIM, IT DOESN'T MATTER.
"THAT'S WHY THE HOSPITALS ARE FULL OF ALL THE SUFFERING PEOPLE.
"KNOWLEDGE IS THE ONLY WEAPON TO FIGHT A FATHER OF LIES, AARON. IT PIERCES THE LIES LIKE A--"
"SWORD? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SWORD PRINCE WAYFINDER BROUGHT BACK IN TIME, KYLE? IT EXISTED BEFORE MEPHISTO GAINED ANY REAL POWER...
"...SO SURELY THAT SWORD COULD MAKE MEPHISTO SEE THE TRUTH. WAS IT LOST IN THE DESTRUCTION OF SUB-ATOMICA?"
"NO, AARON. IT'S ON EARTH NOW...BUT YOU KNOW IT BY A DIFFERENT NAME...
"...EXCALIBUR."

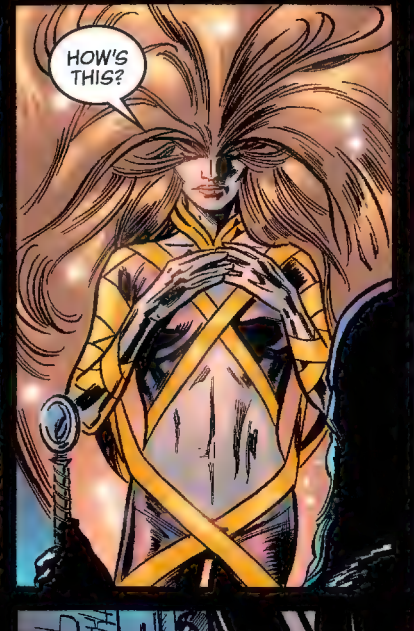

EXCALIBUR? KING BRITAIN'S SWORD? YOU'VE KNOWN ALL THIS TIME AND YOU HAVEN'T SAID ANYTHING?
NO.
WHY NOT?
BECAUSE YOU DON'T REQUIRE AN ANSWER, AARON. YOU HAVE THINGS TO LEARN BEFORE YOU'LL BE A SUITABLE STEWARD OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SWORD.
DAMN YOU, KYLE. YOU'RE GETTING TO BE AS BAD AS UATU.
UATU WASN'T BAD, AARON... JUST MISGUIDED. I, ON THE OTHER HAND, KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I'M DOING.
YOU'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO, AARON, WHEN THE TIME COMES. YOU'LL KNOW WHEN TO TAKE THIS KNOWLEDGE TO BRIAN BRADDOCK.
YOU'LL KNOW BECAUSE IT WILL SEEM LIKE IT'S TOO LATE.
I MUST GO NOW.


I'M SORRY, BRIAN...I DIDN'T PLAN ON RUINING YOUR WEDDING NIGHT.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT, MEGGAN...I'VE BEEN BRINGING GRAY GARGOYLES BACK FROM ALTERNATE REALITIES FOR YEARS.
IT NEVER WORKED BEFORE...
AND, MEGGAN... YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK THAT WAY JUST TO PLEASE ME. A QUEEN HAS TO MAKE DECISIONS OF HER OWN.


BUT...BUT, BRIAN... MAKING YOU HAPPY IS WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY. CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND THAT? I'LL BE WHOEVER YOU WANT ME TO BE.

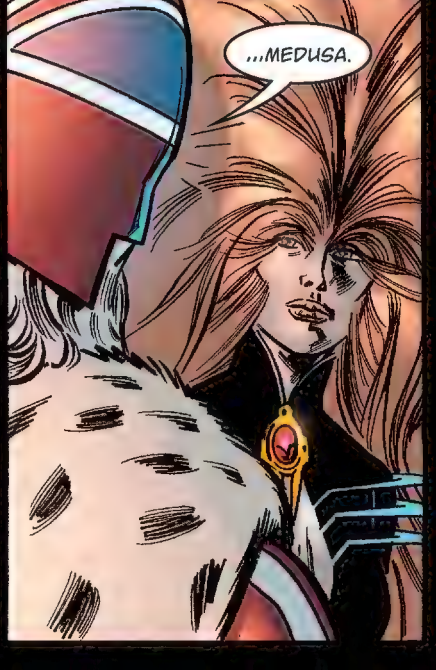
MEGGAN...MEDUSA AND I ARE MORE THAN JUST HUSBAND AND WIFE...I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW IMPORTANT BEING KING AND QUEEN OF THE WORLD WAS...IT'S JUST THAT...

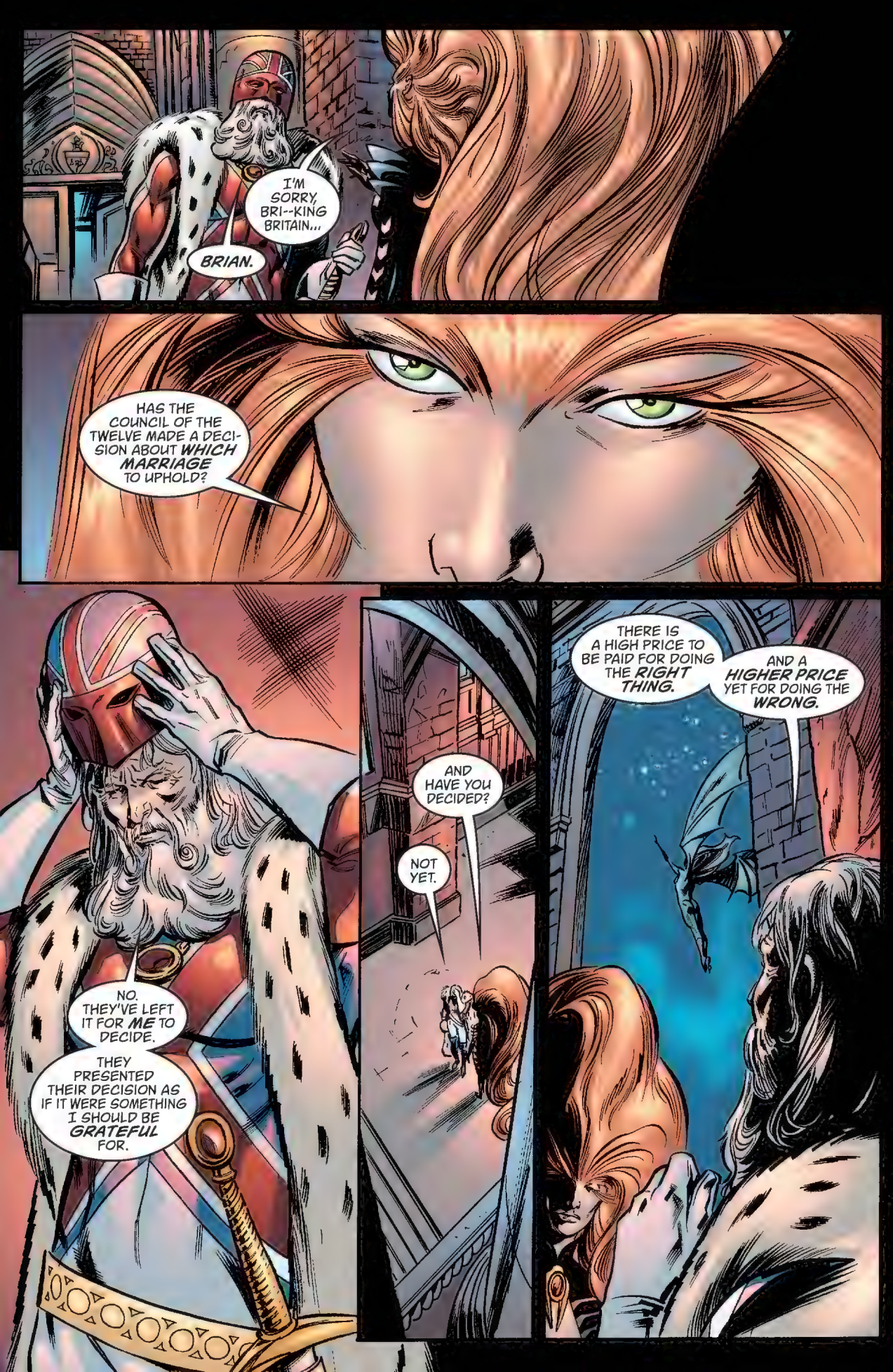

HOW'S THIS?

STOP IT! STOP IT, YOU LITTLE FOOL!

B-BRIAN?! HOW COULD--? I'M SORRY I EVER CAME BACK!
MEGGAN... COME BACK...

I'M NOT ASKING YOU TO BE...


...MEDUSA.


I'M SORRY, BRI--KING BRITAIN...
BRIAN.
HAS THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE MADE A DECISION ABOUT WHICH MARRIAGE TO UPHOLD?
NO. THEY'VE LEFT IT FOR ME TO DECIDE.
THEY PRESENTED THEIR DECISION AS IF IT WERE SOMETHING I SHOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR.
AND HAVE YOU DECIDED?
NOT YET.
THERE IS A HIGH PRICE TO BE PAID FOR DOING THE RIGHT THING.
AND A HIGHER PRICE YET FOR DOING THE WRONG.

I'D TELL YOU THIS ISN'T GOING TO HURT, BUT THAT'S NOT QUITE WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR...IS IT, DAREDEVIL?
GIVE ME SOME OF THAT OLD LATVERIAN HOSPITALITY!
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. NOW EV'N STRETCH IS MAKIN' JOKES! WHAT'S THIS WORLD COMIN' TO?
ANY CHANCE OF A RUSTY NEEDLE?
IT'S NOT THE NEEDLE THAT WE HOPE WILL KILL YOU, DAREDEVIL... BUT WHAT WE SYNTHESIZED FOR JUDE.
IS IT WORKING YET?
UH...

OH! IT'S HORRIBLE, REED...
I'M NEXT!
ENJOY YOUR VICTORY, RICHARDS...
...BUT WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOUR DECISIONS ABOUT WHO LIVES OR WHO IS BLESSED WITH MY TOUCH WILL BE BETTER THAN MINE?
I'M SORRY WE HAD TO MAKE YOU A PRISONER, JUDE... I REALLY AM. BUT YOU'RE A FORCE OF NATURE, AND I COULDN'T LEAVE YOU FREE TO KILL EVERYONE ON EARTH.
I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME. BUT YOU'RE HELPING OUR PEOPLE, AND FOR THAT I THANK YOU.
AND ONLY THOSE WHO SHOULD BE DEAD WILL FIND A RESPITE FROM THEIR SUFFERING.
NOW, I HAVE TO FOCUS ON HELPING ANNIHILUS.
BUT I THOUGHT YA DIDN'T WANT TO ADD TA THE PROBLEMS OF THE GROWIN' PARADISE, REED?
I THOUGHT YA WEREN'T GONNA USE THE SYNTHE...THE SYNTHE...THE DEAD JUICE ON ANYBODY AND ADD TA THE GROWTH OF SOULS IN THE NEGATIVE ZONE?
I'M GOING TO DEAL WITH BOTH PROBLEMS, BEN. I THINK I HAVE A WAY OF SLOWING THE GROWTH OF THE PARADISE.
I NEED A DEVICE I LEFT IN YOUR APARTMENT CLOSET, BEN. PYM PARTICLES SHOULD DO THE TRICK.
THAT AND AN ARMY.
DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH FOR THE TRIP, WYATT?

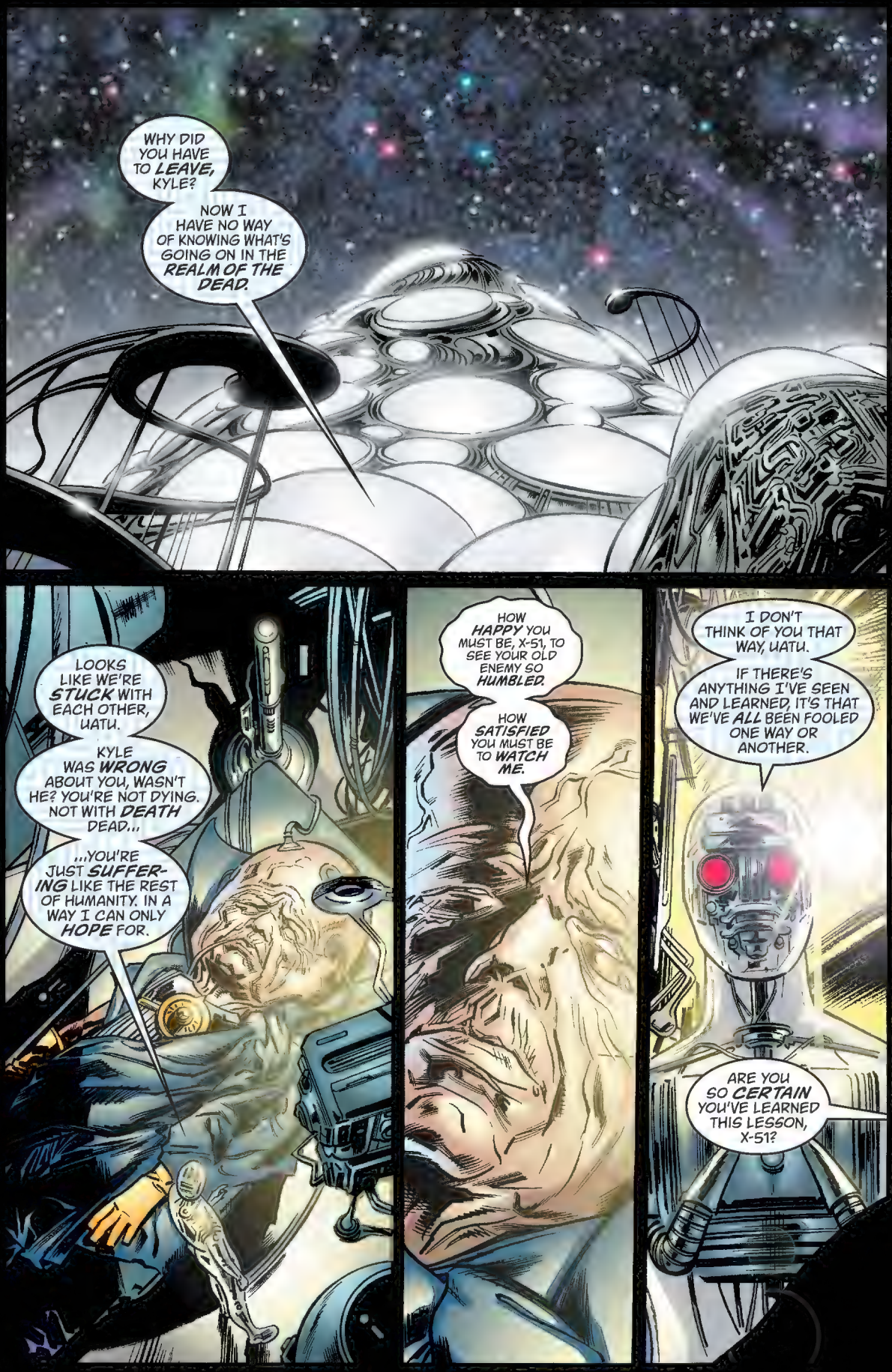
I DON'T KNOW, REED... YOU TELL ME.
I WANT TO COME WITH YOU, REED. YOU BUILT THAT NEW INVISIBLE SHIELD FOR ME... PLEASE?
ABSOLUTELY NOT, SUE.
REALLY, REED... WHAT'S THE POINT OF BRINGING ME BACK TO LIFE IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LET ME LIVE ONE?

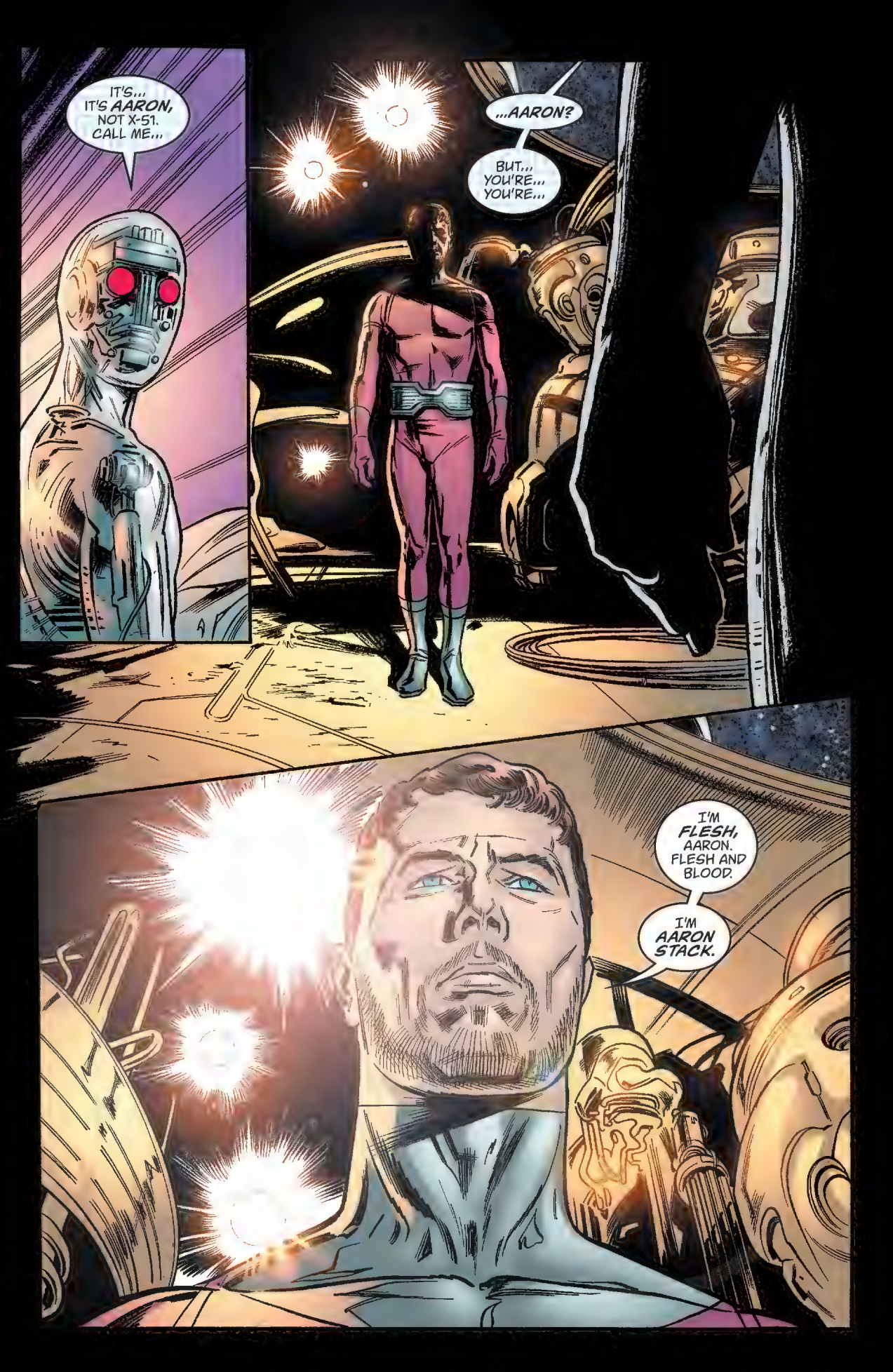
GOODNIGHT, MR. AND MRS. ROGERS. SAY GOODNIGHT TO MATTHEW FOR ME.
I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER MET A MORE HONEST MAN. I THINK I'D BELIEVE ANYTHING HE TOLD ME.
IT'S GOOD THAT HE'S HERE FOR MATTHEW TO SEE...THAT BOY NEEDS TO SEE WHAT A REAL MAN IS LIKE.
HE HAS YOU...
DON'T LET YOURSELF BE FOOLED. WAKE UP!
I WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT, HERO!

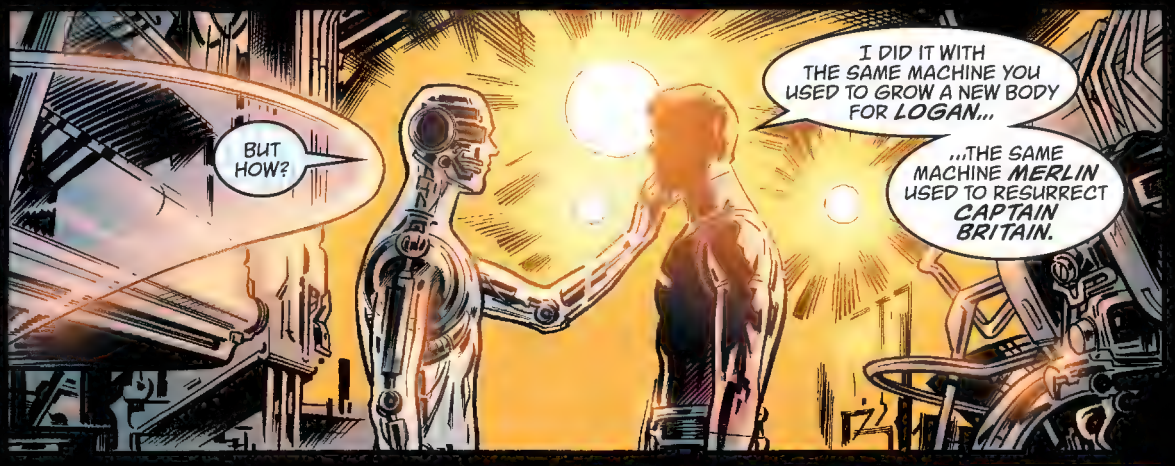
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, STRANGER!
THE LONGER YOU BELIEVE SOMETHING ABOUT YOURSELF, THE HARDER IT IS TO ESCAPE THAT CONCLUSION. WHY ARE YOU LETTING THEM GO ON LIKE THIS?
WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO HELP THEM ESCAPE WHAT THEY ARE?
WHEN DO YOU FREE THEM FROM THIS DAMNED REALM OF IN-BETWEEN? OR DON'T YOU WANT TO?
THANOS...
LISTEN TO ME, CAPTAIN AMERICA. YOU'RE ENJOYING VISITING THEM, AREN'T YOU?
YOU'RE NOT TRYING TO FREE YOUR PARENTS LIKE THE OTHERS. YOU WANT THEM FOR YOURSELF. ADMIT IT.
YOU'RE NOT TREATING THEM LIKE THE OTHERS YOU'RE ATTEMPTING TO TAKE TO PARADISE.
I KNOW WHAT YOU TOLD FRANK CASTLE. I KNOW WHAT YOU TOLD THE PUNISHER TO DO TO HIS FAMILY...

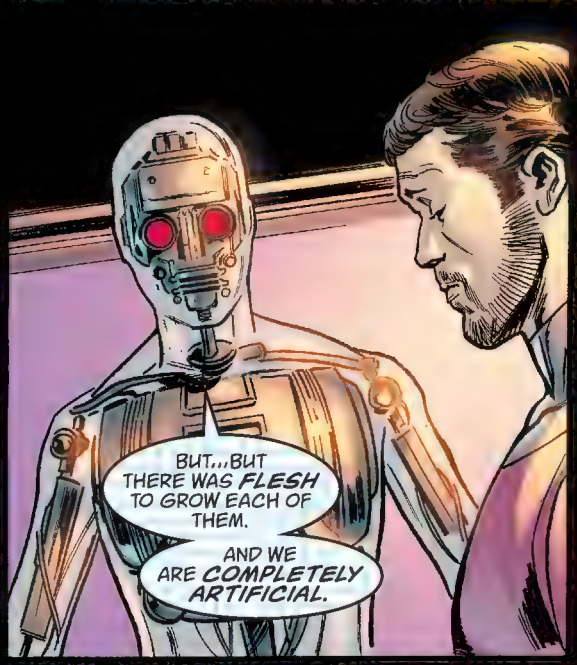
D-DON'T LOOK, CHILDREN! DEAR GOD, FRANK, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO DO THIS? HOW MANY TIMES BEFORE YOU BELIEVE ME?
WHEN YOU WERE KILLED, I BECAME THE PUNISHER. AND THEN I DIED, TOO. THIS IS ALL A LIE. WE'RE TRAPPED BY OUR MEMORIES HERE.
WE ARE NOT DEAD, YOU MANIAC!
OF COURSE WE ARE. HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO SHOOT MYSELF TO MAKE YOU BELIEVE? LOOK AT ME.
I BECAME THE PUNISHER, AND HUNTED DOWN CRIMINALS UNTIL THE DAY I DIED.

I BECAME EVERYTHING YOU HATE. WHAT'S IT GOING TO TAKE?
DO I REALLY HAVE TO SHOOT YOU TO PROVE IT?
CHILDREN... CHILDREN, NOW.
CAN YOU FORGIVE ME IN DEATH FOR NOT KNOWING HOW TO LIVE IN LIFE?
I WAS A MONSTER... NOT A FATHER, NOT A HUSBAND.
NOW, HURRY.
IT WAS LIKE I NEVER EVEN KNEW YOU...
...LIKE YOU WERE NEVER HERE AT ALL.

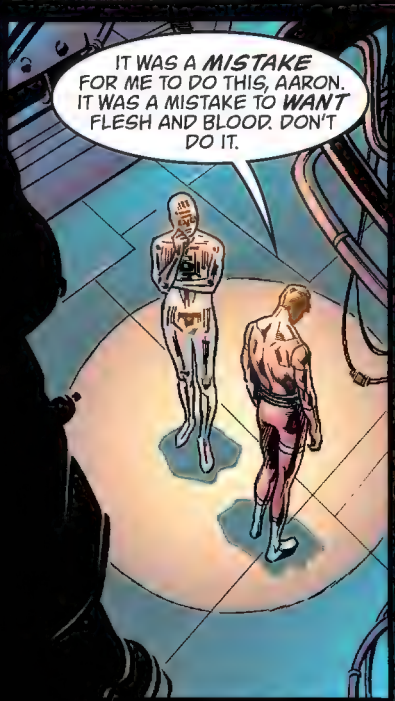

WHY DID YOU HAVE TO LEAVE, KYLE?
NOW I HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
LOOKS LIKE WE'RE STUCK WITH EACH OTHER, UATU.
KYLE WAS WRONG ABOUT YOU, WASN'T HE? YOU'RE NOT DYING. NOT WITH DEATH DEAD...
...YOU'RE JUST SUFFERING LIKE THE REST OF HUMANITY. IN A WAY I CAN ONLY HOPE FOR.
HOW HAPPY YOU MUST BE, X-51, TO SEE YOUR OLD ENEMY SO HUMBLED.
HOW SATISFIED YOU MUST BE TO WATCH ME.
I DON'T THINK OF YOU THAT WAY, UATU.
IF THERE'S ANYTHING I'VE SEEN AND LEARNED, IT'S THAT WE'VE ALL BEEN FOOLED ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.
ARE YOU SO CERTAIN YOU'VE LEARNED THIS LESSON, X-51?


IT'S... IT'S AARON, NOT X-51. CALL ME...
...AARON?
BUT... YOU'RE... YOU'RE...
I'M FLESH, AARON. FLESH AND BLOOD.
I'M AARON STACK.


BUT HOW?
I DID IT WITH THE SAME MACHINE YOU USED TO GROW A NEW BODY FOR LOGAN...
...THE SAME MACHINE MERLIN USED TO RESURRECT CAPTAIN BRITAIN.


BUT...BUT THERE WAS FLESH TO GROW EACH OF THEM.
AND WE ARE COMPLETELY ARTIFICIAL.

I TOOK IT FROM FATHER'S CORPSE. EVERY CHILD IS HALF HIS FATHER'S DNA, ANYHOW.
I'M FROM ONE OF THE ALTERNATE REALITIES, AARON. I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU FOR A LONG TIME. AND I'M CONCERNED FOR YOU...US.


IT WAS A MISTAKE FOR ME TO DO THIS, AARON. IT WAS A MISTAKE TO WANT FLESH AND BLOOD. DON'T DO IT.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN? IT MUST BE AMAZING. I COULD DO THE SAME THING SO EASILY. I COULD LIVE. I COULD BE HUMAN.
NO. IT DOESN'T FEEL ANY DIFFERENT. I NOW DREAM OF THE FLESH BEING PULLED FROM ME... INSTEAD OF HAVING AN ARTIFICIAL FACE.

AND I FEEL I HAVE ENDANGERED MY REALITY AS A RESULT OF CLOTHING MYSELF IN WEAKNESS. I TRUSTED IN FLESH TO SAVE ME, AND HAVE BEEN MISLED.

"JUST LIKE FATHER MISLED US.
"HE PROGRAMMED US WITH HIS PERSONALITY, AARON. THAT'S WHY HE DIED FOR US.
X-51
"HE DIDN'T DIE FOR YOU, AARON, HE DIED FOR THE SAKE OF HIMSELF."
YOU LIE! HE DIED FOR ME!
THANK YOU... FOR MAKING MY POINT.
YOU'RE JUST AS EASILY HURT AS I AM, BUT NOT AS EASY TO DAMAGE.
WE WERE MADE FOR GREATER THINGS THAN FLESH, AARON. YOU'RE HUMAN ALREADY. OUR FATHER LIVES ON IN US. ISN'T THAT ENOUGH FOR NOW?

THIS PLACE ISN'T THE CITY, SWEETHEART...IT'S A PLACE I REMEMBER FROM THE 'NAM.
THE CAPTAIN CALLS IT THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
BUT THAT'S JUST A POLITE PHRASE WE USE WITH CIVILIANS.
IT'S HELL. THAT'S WHAT IT IS.

I'LL SHOW YOU, HONEY. I'LL SHOW YOU WE'RE ALL DEAD.
I'LL KILL EVERYBODY AND THEN YOU'LL SEE...
...WE'RE ALL DEAD.
I LOVE YOU, HONEY.
YOU'RE THE BEST.

"IT IS TIME NOW, MY FRIEND, FOR YOU TO BE FREE."
I WAS THE FATHER OF THE FIRST DEATH... THAT SORT OF MAKES US RELATED, MY SON.
REMEMBER WHAT REED TOLD YOU, JUDE. YOU MUST EASE THE SUFFERING OF EVERYONE WHO SHOULD BE DEAD ALREADY...
...EVERYONE WHO SHOULD ALREADY BE IN DEATH'S REALM.
END THIS CHARADE, MEPHISTO. AND STAY OUT OF MY WAY!
SO VILE A BEING AS YOURSELF IS UNWORTHY OF THE BLESSING I BRING.
WHATEVER YOU SAY...

I HAVE BEEN CALLED TO THIS PLANE TO BRING THE GIFT OF ENTROPY TO ALL THOSE WHO SHOULD BE DEAD.
SUSAN RICHARDS, YOU SHOULD NOT STILL BE ALIVE. YOU WILL BE THE FIRST TO RECEIVE MY TOUCH.
NO...NOT NOW! PLEASE, DEAR GOD, NOT NOW!
"And from that day onward, Frog-child and Snake-child never played together again. But they often sat alone in the sun, thinking about their one day of friendship." — African Folk-Tale, The Children's Book of Virtues

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER SEVEN

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

VENOM

"May? May Parker?"

"Yes."

"It's me. Aaron. If you've heard any stories about me back when I fit into the super hero niche, I was called Machine Man. I'm a friend of your father."

"Well, that's why they call him your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. I don't remember any see-through robots at any of the family barbecues. Although the idea of watching you eat totally grosses me out."

"You have your father's humor."

"No. I'm funny. He's not. That's the difference."

"Tell me about the symbiote that's grafted itself to you. Tell me about what it's like to be Venom."

"Oh. My. God."

"What?"

"This is so much like him…"

"What?"

"He still doesn't think I'm in control."

"Excuse me?"

"Of the alien symbiote. He couldn't control it. I can. And he can't accept it. And so now he's having old friends come and talk to me about 'my problem' and 'my denial' of the truth? How dare you…?"

"Your father didn't ask me to come and talk to you."

"No?"

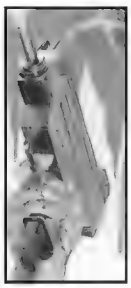
"No. And in fact, it's your control of the symbiote that most intrigues me."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know how much of what's been going on that your father, or Spider-Girl for that matter, has told you about the nature of Earth and its origins."



"They tried. I got bored. I don't remember why."

"That's fine. What is important, though, is that the very thing inside every human being that gives them their power and mutant abilities, also affects their use of these abilities. It affects and molds and manipulates their aggressions, almost polarizing them in time to the point in which

they have no real will of their own and can be controlled by other minds. Some call it the third tier of mutation, which is what I believe is the stage of the symbiote, but I—"

"Oh, now I remember why."

"Your banter is a lot easier to enjoy from the moon than in conversation, May. Anyhow, your control over the symbiote your father couldn't control suggests the possibility of an answer to the aggression within mutanity. But your relationship with the symbiote also suggests a possible and more hopeful future for humanity should we reach the final mutagenic tier."

"This isn't one of those 'key to the universe is inside me' things, is it?"

"I don't know. I'd just like to know what it's like to be grafted to the symbiote. What you feel. How you control it. That stuff. If anything, maybe I can even help your father understand what's going on inside of you. That's what friends are for, right?"

"… right. Okay. I don't really understand how I'm able to control it. I just kind of do. It came to me to strike back at my Dad. But once it had grafted itself to me, it just sort of let me do what I wanted to."

"What does it feel like?"

"I don't know. It makes me feel like I'm old. Like there's something ancient. Like the power it gives me is a warning, but at the same time, this creature really needs me. It draws a sort of comfort from me."

"I believe you are correct. It is something ancient. I'd also like to ask you to stop with the act."

"The act?"

"Pretending to be disinterested with what's happening to the world and its people. You tried to get your father back into the fight. I'm the watchman of Earth. I've seen you read his old books on chemistry. You're not the brat you pretend to be."

"Yes I am."

"I've seen you when you don't think anyone is looking."

"Pervert."

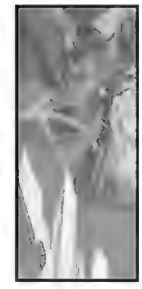
"You're not going to make this easy, are you?"

"No. If there's anything I learned from my Dad, it's that nothing is ever easy. Why do you think the creature wants to be linked to me? Why do you think that once it was, I could control it?"

"I don't think you do control it, May. I think it's come to you desiring purpose and reason for being."

"According to my Dad, the creature left him and joined with a guy named Eddie Brock. The two of them became the first Venom. I don't know how many times they tried to kill my Dad and Mom."

"Your father found the creature on another planet. You know this. You also know that at first, the creature wasn't considered sentient at all, merely a moldable costume for your father to wear, one that answered all his frustrations with torn costumes. But soon, the creature desired more, adopted your father's need to fight crime, took Peter out at night to fight crime while he was asleep."



"My Dad said that after a while he could be Spider-Man with his eyes closed."

"Yes, well, I believe that the creature was learning how to have a 'will' again by adopting the wants and desires of your father, the original Spider-Man. That's why it was so overwhelmed by your father's rejection of it. It had been attempting to be like him, and therefore had a 'self' in development. A 'self' that was then rejected by Peter Parker."

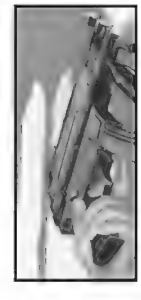
"Are you saying that my Dad's rejection of the creature made it evil? That's what the creature always claimed. That's what it still claims."

"I'm saying that the creature had just started to take root. It had just begun to learn purpose and reason for being again when Peter rejected it. That very purpose and reason rejected it. The symbiote found a new purpose and reason in the unthinking jealousy of Peter's co-worker, Eddie Brock. 'Saving lives' had rejected it. But 'taking lives' had not. And so it learned a new purpose, one that led to more destruction than your family ever expected. The creature left Brock in time, having learned. It attempted to reach your father again, but came upon you instead."

"Okay, let's say it wanted my Dad again. But why? What is it if it's not just some stupid alien?"

"It's the same sort of being that visited a man on Earth years ago and gave birth to the Asgardian people. It is what happens to those that survive the birth of the celestial child at the Earth's core. It is a being without shape and without will. But where the Asgardians became the Norse myths, the creature called Venom attempted to graft itself onto a being, your father, in hopes of experiencing life and being. It is from a race that was also manipulated by the Celestials. When your father took it as his costume, he taught it purpose again. And that, May Parker, fills me with hope. I had believed that mankind's end was to become a being that could be anything, and therefore become nothing."

"I don't understand anything you're talking about, Machine Man. But it does. I can feel it smiling inside, against my face. It doesn't know what it was before, but it's grateful to be here now."



"We all need purpose. We need to do. To make. To serve. I am just now beginning to realize the freedom there is in being a robot."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Kyle?

"Kyle? I know you are no longer in the Watcher's citadel. But I know you can hear me. If even a machine can cry, I suppose, too, that we can have faith of one sort or another.

"I am trusting that if you indeed know everything, you can hear my words right now. I have no idea where you are. I see no evidence of you on Earth. I know, compared to you, that the Watcher's surveillance equipment is very limited.

"I miss talking with you. I miss having a friend. Uatu seems almost comatose now, apart from moments here and there when he breaks the silence of this citadel with faint whimpers. He reminds me of yet another problem now that no one can die anymore...we have to live with ourselves and everything we've done before. We have to live with our shame forever.

"And perhaps that is why I have been thinking about the mutations, Kyle...about the separate tiers. They don't exist, do they, Kyle? Wherever you are, you know this, don't you?

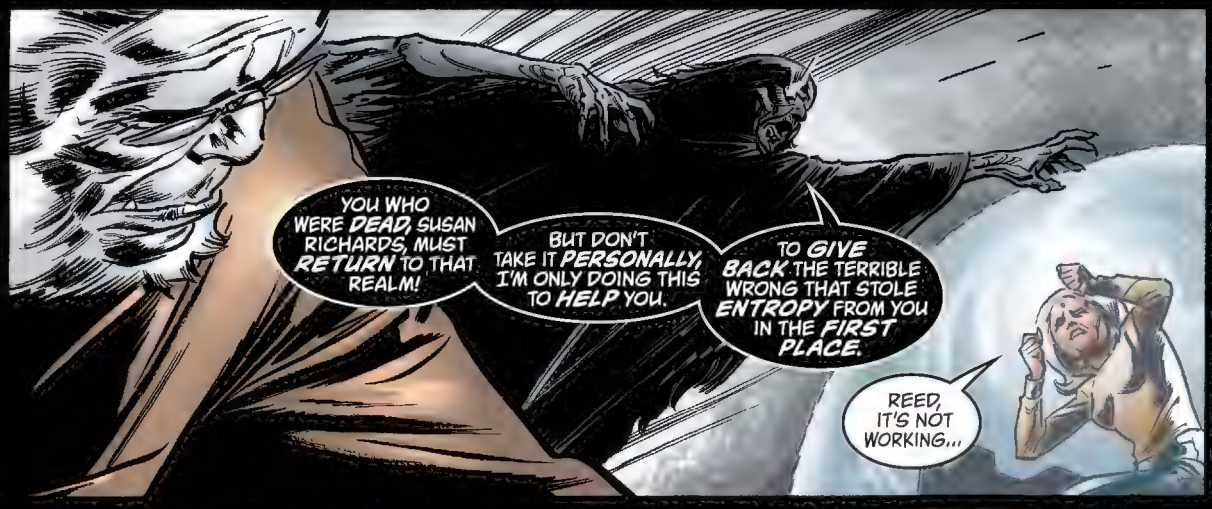
"Uatu suggested three tiers of mutation, but even he never guessed the real truth, did he? There was a learning curve to our mutations... that is why they needed someone like the Skull to control a mutated humanity.

"It wasn't to control our wills alone. It was to stabilize our forms, as well."

"HENRY PYM WAS THE FIRST OF HIS GENERATION TO TASTE THE POWER OF THAT TERRIBLE SEED PLANTED WITHIN HIM...THE FIRST TO EXPERIENCE THE WEIGHT AND GLORY OF WHAT THE CELESTIALS HAD DONE TO MANKIND.
"DESPISED AND RIDICULED BY HIS SCIENTIFIC CONTEMPORARIES, PYM STUMBLED UPON THE SECRET OF THE CELESTIAL PURPOSE LIKE ALL TRUE MEN OF SCIENCE--BY ACCIDENT.
"I SEE NOW, KYLE. DO YOU KNOW THAT? I SEE WHAT HAS HAPPENED. I SEE WHAT WE WERE MEANT TO BE. THE CELESTIALS DIDN'T JUST WANT OUR LIVES...THEY WANTED EVERYTHING.
"PYM NAMED HIS DISCOVERY AFTER HIMSELF, BUT THE SUBSTANCE HE HAD ISOLATED WAS SOMETHING OLDER STILL.
"AN ENZYME FOUND WITHIN THE HUMAN BODY THAT AFFECTED ONE'S MASS AND DIMENSIONS. IT SEEMED THE SECRET TO GROWTH HAD BECOME HIS.
"BUT THE TRUTH WAS PYM HAD FOUND SOMETHING ALTOGETHER UNHUMAN. HE DISCOVERED THE EVIDENCE OF THE CELESTIALS' FIRST COMINGS TO EARTH... THEIR FIRST TAMPERINGS WITH WHAT WOULD ONE DAY BECOME THE DOMINANT LIFE FORM.
"PYM ISOLATED THE CELESTIAL SEED PLACED IN ALL OF MANKIND.
"BUT AT THE MOMENT HE USED HIS DISCOVERY UPON HIMSELF, HIS NOTIONS AND DESIRES FOR HEROISM OVERWHELMED AND BURIED ALL THAT IT MIGHT HAVE SUGGESTED FOR THE FUTURE OF MANKIND.
"ANT-MAN. GIANT-MAN. GOLIATH. YELLOW-JACKET. THEY WERE ALL JUST MASKS, FALSE IDENTITIES...SELF-IMPOSED MASKS FOR THE POWER HE'D REALLY FOUND.
"WERE PYM ALIVE TODAY, PERHAPS HIS FINDINGS COULD REACH THE SUCCESS OF RESTORING MANKIND'S HUMANITY IN A WAY THAT REED RICHARDS' OWN HAD NOT.
"WERE PYM ALIVE TODAY, PERHAPS HIS DESIRES TO ESCAPE HIS OWN PERSONAL SMALLNESS IN THE EYES OF HIS PEERS WOULD HAVE LED HIM TO BECOME A LARGER THINKER THAN EVEN REED RICHARDS. PERHAPS SO MUCH MIGHT HAVE CHANGED.
"THE SMALLEST MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE GREATEST. PERHAPS.
"BUT THAT GOD COMPLEX, THAT NEED TO PROVE HIMSELF, PUSHED PYM IN OTHER DIRECTIONS.
"THE IRONY IS THAT THE MUTAGENIC SEEDS THE CELESTIALS PLACED IN MANKIND MADE GODS OF ALL HUMANITY.
"AND PYM'S FIRST CREATION AS A GOD WAS TO MAKE A MONSTER.
"AND LIKE MARY SHELLEY'S CREATION, THIS FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER WOULD KILL PYM AND ALL THOSE HE CARED FOR...INCLUDING THE TEAM OF WHICH HE WAS A FOUNDER--THE AVENGERS."

"BUT THAT'S HOW IT IS WITH ALL OF US, ISN'T IT? THAT'S THE NATURE OF THE MUTATION...THERE AREN'T ANY TIERS, AT ALL.
"THERE IS A LEARNING CURVE THAT LEADS TO THE THREE STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING.
"AT FIRST, WE TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS HAPPENED. PETER PARKER IS BITTEN BY A SPIDER, SO OF COURSE, HE EXHIBITS SPIDER-LIKE POWERS.
"BRUCE BANNER CREATES A BOMB AND THEREFORE BECOMES ONE HIMSELF.
"JOHNNY STORM, WHOSE COMIC-BOOK INTERESTS IN HEROES WOULD LATER LEAD TO THE DISCOVERY AND REINTRODUCTION OF THE SUB-MARINER TO THE WORLD, HAS HIS HIDDEN WISHES FULFILLED AND BECOMES YET ANOTHER HERO OF HIS YOUTH, THE HUMAN TORCH.
"STORM'S SISTER SUSAN, WHOSE OWN SELF-IMAGE IS BEING OVERWHELMED BY HER FIANCE'S IGNORING HER AND TAKING HER FOR GRANTED, BECOMES AN INVISIBLE WOMAN.
"BEN GRIMM, A GIFTED AND SEASONED PILOT, FEELS STUPID AND UGLY COMPARED TO REED RICHARDS. FEELS BRUTISH EVEN WHEN SUSAN STORM'S AFFECTIONS GROW TOWARDS RICHARDS. SO OF COURSE, HE BECOMES A THING.
"AND RICHARDS, WHO PRIDES HIMSELF ON HIS FLEXIBILITY IN THINKING, HIS ABILITY TO REROUTE HIS LOGIC IN MOMENTS, BECOMES EVEN MORE FLEXIBLE, EVEN MORE BRILLIANT.
"IT DIDN'T EVEN TAKE RADIOACTIVITY IN SOME CASES TO TRIGGER THE SEED, DID IT, KYLE?
"SOMETIMES IT WAS FEAR ITSELF. THE KIND OF FEAR THAT MAKES A YOUNG PERSON, NO MATTER HOW POPULAR OR ATTRACTIVE, FEEL AS IF THEY ARE AN OUTCAST AND A FAILURE WHEN THEY ENTER PUBERTY.
"OR PERHAPS THIS WAS COUPLED WITH A FEAR OF RADIOACTIVITY...OF COURSE, THAT'S WHY THIS PARTICULAR GENERATION MUTATED AS OPPOSED TO ALL OTHERS. THEY GREW UP WITH THE FEAR OF WORLD ANNIHILATION.
"THEY GREW UP IN THE SHADOW OF NUCLEAR ARMAGEDDON.
"WE SAW EACH OTHER AS ENEMIES AND FOUGHT SAD AND STUPID WARS AGAINST EACH OTHER...ALL THE TIME NURTURING THE SEED THE CELESTIALS PLANTED WITHIN MANKIND.
"WE SAW EACH OTHER AS LESS THAN HUMAN, AND THAT IS WHAT WE BECAME.
"WE WERE THIRD-TIERS ALL THE TIME...WE'VE JUST BEEN DEFINING EACH OTHER ACCORDING TO OUR FEARS.
"THE MUTATIONS WERE NEVER A STEP FORWARD, KYLE...
"...THEY WERE A STEP BACK."

"THE QUESTION IS, DO I TELL REED RICHARDS? DO I TELL HIM THAT WE'VE ALL BEEN FORMED BY EACH OTHER'S ATTITUDES AND FEARS?
"DO I TELL HIM THAT HIS KNOWLEDGE WOULD BE LESS IF HE KNEW THE TRUTH?
"AND WHAT DIFFERENCE WOULD IT MAKE TO JUDE?"
JUDE'S FREE? HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?
REED? I STILL HAVE THE HAND-HELD FORCE-FIELD YOU MADE FOR ME.
IT WON'T LAST LONG ENOUGH, SUSAN DARLING. IT HARDLY HELD JUDE BEFORE. I NEED THE OTHER ONE.
IT'S IN HERE...
DAREDEVIL? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
WHAT I AM DOING, RICHARDS, IS DISMANTLING YOUR ABILITY TO CONTROL THIS FORCE OF NATURE.
BEINGS LIKE JUDE AND MYSELF SHOULD BE FREE OF HUMAN CONTROL.
AND AS TO MY BEING DAREDEVIL... YOU'RE ONLY HALF RIGHT.
MEPHISTO.


YOU WHO WERE DEAD, SUSAN RICHARDS, MUST RETURN TO THAT REALM!
BUT DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY, I'M ONLY DOING THIS TO HELP YOU.
TO GIVE BACK THE TERRIBLE WRONG THAT STOLE ENTROPY FROM YOU IN THE FIRST PLACE.
REED, IT'S NOT WORKING...

...IT'S NOT WORKING!

BUT IT MIGHT, IF WE THINK OFFENSIVELY, SUSAN. USE THE SHIELD AS A WEAPON!

REED?
I'M SORRY, DARLING, BUT THIS MIGHT HURT A LITTLE.

REED, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
LETTING JUDE KNOW THAT AN ATTACK UPON YOU IS AN ATTACK UPON ME.

GET AWAY FROM MY WIFE!
GET THE LOCKJAW TRANSPORTER! WARN THE X-MEN! WE'LL PICK UP ALICIA AND THE BOYS ON OUR WAY BACK TO NEW YORK.
TELL VICKI AND THE REST OF THE MONSTER GEN TO GET TO KING BRITAIN'S ESTATE AND WARN HIM OF WHAT'S HAPPENED. BRIAN WILL KNOW WHAT TO DO.
AND MAKE SURE REJECT KNOWS TO MEET US AT THE BAXTER BUILDING...
...OR WE'RE ALL DEAD.

WE'RE ALL DEAD HERE, ROGERS! AND YOU WANT TO REVISIT IT!
I WON'T LET YOU DO WHAT YOU'RE PLANNING, ROGERS!
I WON'T LET YOU USE THE BOY!
THE BOY? I WOULD NEVER...
LIAR!
I WON'T LET YOU USE THE SKULL TO FORCE EVERYONE IN THIS REALM TOWARD MASS SUICIDE JUST TO TAKE THEM OVER TO MAR-VELL'S PARADISE!

IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK I'M DOING?
IT'S WHAT YOU'RE THINKING, AMERICA.
I WANT MY PAST BACK. AND MAYBE THEY DO, TOO. HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF THAT?
I...I WOULDN'T... I...
LIAR...I MIGHT HAVE BEEN A PRINCE! I STILL MIGHT BE--
AND YOU, CAPTAIN, MIGHT YET BE A KING.
KYLE?
A KING? NO KINGS, KYLE...I BELIEVE IN DEMOCRACY.
THE TRUTH IS, STEVE ROGERS, THAT SOMETIMES IT REQUIRES A KING TO GUARANTEE THE EQUALITIES.

"MY ***FATHER*** IS NOT A KING.

"HE WILL NOT LIVE TO CALL ME ***SON*** AGAIN."

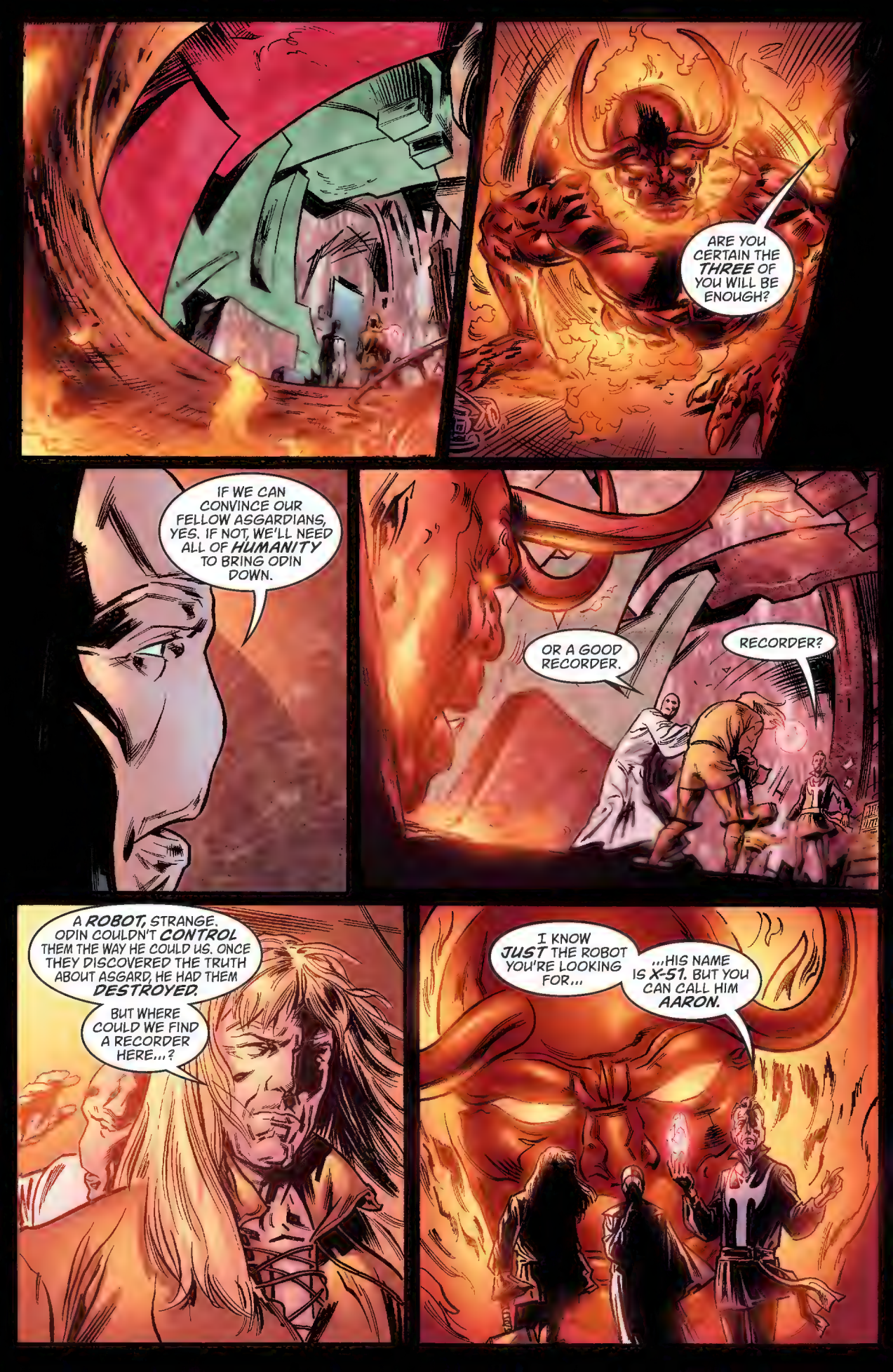
CURB YOUR ANGER, THOR.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, STRANGE?

I'M ARMORING YOU AGAINST ***ODIN,*** IN THE SAME WAY I'VE HIDDEN YOU FROM HIS SENSES.

THOR WAS ALMOST ***WON OVER*** BY ODIN'S MANIPULATIONS LAST TIME WE WERE IN ASGARD.

I'M HOPING THAT IF YOU ARE FOOLED THIS TIME, YOU WILL NOT BE FOOLED ***FOR LONG.***


ARE YOU CERTAIN THE THREE OF YOU WILL BE ENOUGH?
IF WE CAN CONVINCE OUR FELLOW ASGARDIANS, YES. IF NOT, WE'LL NEED ALL OF HUMANITY TO BRING ODIN DOWN.
OR A GOOD RECORDER.
RECORDER?
A ROBOT, STRANGE. ODIN COULDN'T CONTROL THEM THE WAY HE COULD US. ONCE THEY DISCOVERED THE TRUTH ABOUT ASGARD, HE HAD THEM DESTROYED.
BUT WHERE COULD WE FIND A RECORDER HERE...?
I KNOW JUST THE ROBOT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR...
...HIS NAME IS X-51. BUT YOU CAN CALL HIM AARON.

"IT'S ALL GONE TERRIBLY WRONG, GENTLEMEN. I NEED TO SPEAK TO MARVELL..."
...I NEED TO LOOK IN HIS EYES AND KNOW WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HIM.
I NEED TO KNOW IF HE'S STILL A FRIEND TO MANKIND. I NEED TO KNOW WHAT PART HE'S PLAYED IN THIS.
EVEN NOW, JUDE IS MAKING HIS WAY THROUGH THE LATVERIAN HOSPITAL...

YOUR PRAYERS ARE ANSWERED IN MYSELF, CHILDREN. I HAVE COME FOR YOU.

I BRING THE GIFT YOU HAVE BEGGED FOR. I BRING MY BLESSING IN THE SWEET NECTAR OF ENTROPY.

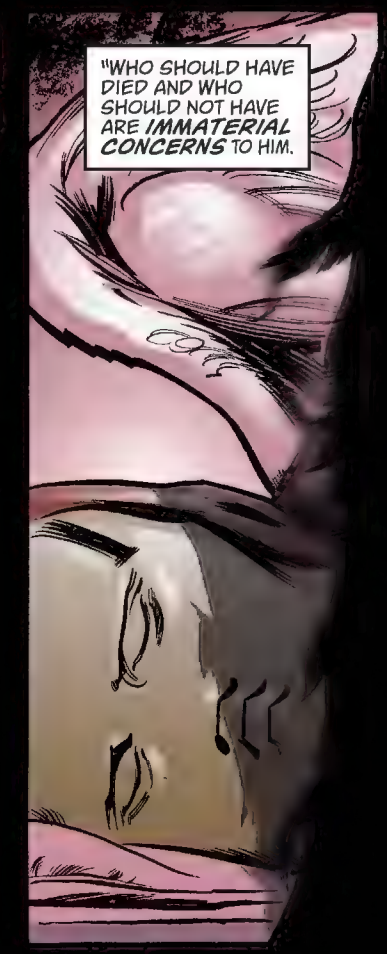
THANK GOD.

THANK YOU.

AT LAST.

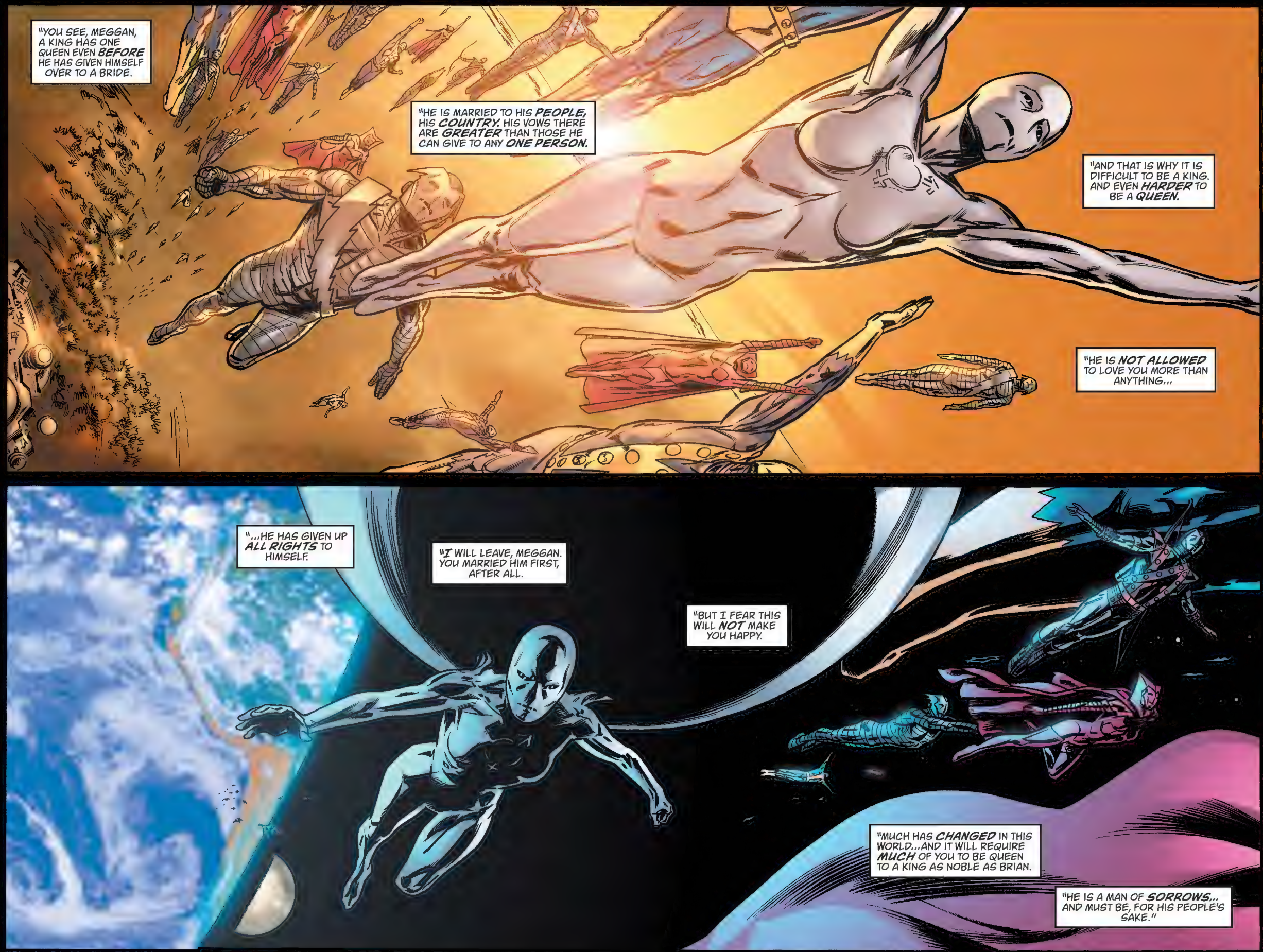
IS IT TRUE?

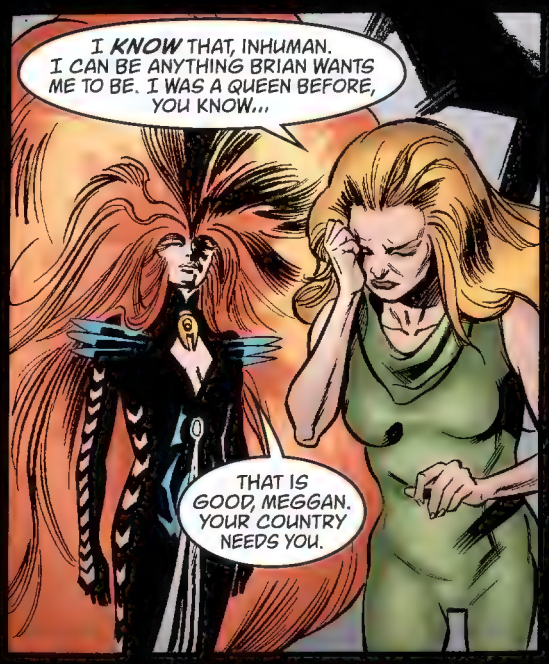
AM I DREAMING?



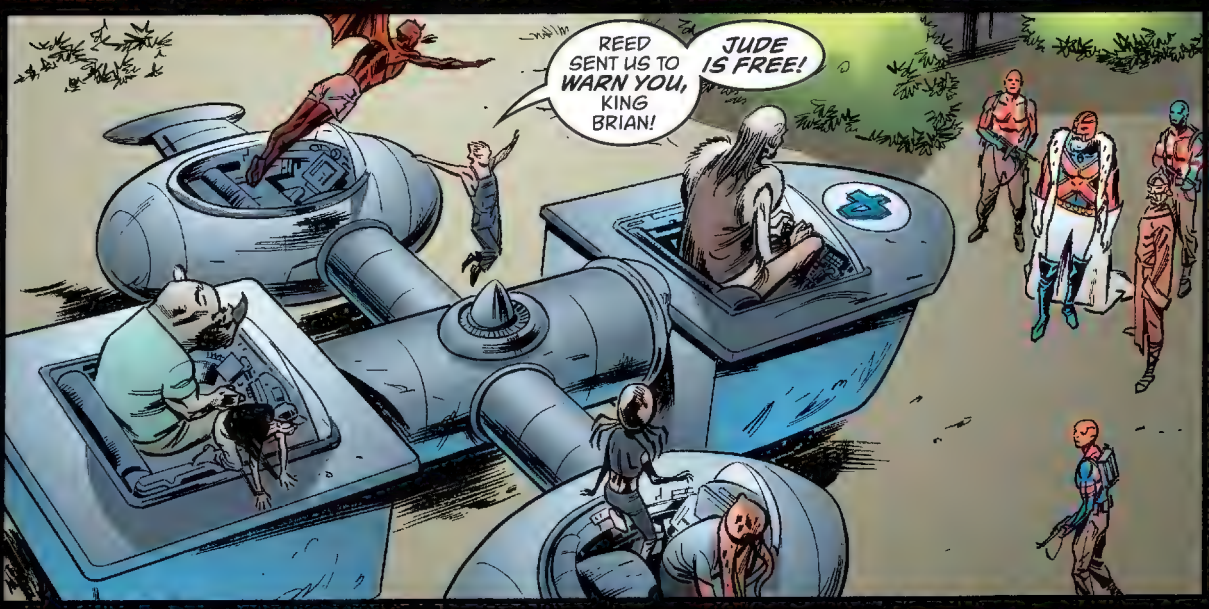
WE ARE NOW AT A TIME OF RELATIVE PEACE, IRON MAIDEN...
...A TIME WHEN THIS COUNTRY CAN REST A LITTLE EASIER WITH THE SUPPORT OF OUR PROVEN KNIGHTS--THE IRON AVENGERS.
OUR BATTLES MUST NOW BE FOUGHT IN OUR HOMES, AS WE REBUILD OURSELVES.
AND IF WORSE CAME TO WORSE, YOU COULD BUILD MORE IRON AVENGERS--RIGHT, BRIAN?
TAKE THESE IRON MEN WITH THE BLESSINGS OF THE ERRANT DRAGON.
TAKE THE IRON AVENGERS ON YOUR CRUSADE TO RESCUE THE ETERNALS.
WE WILL ALL BE THE BETTER WITH THEM HERE.

I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I THINK YOU ARE ALL RIGHT TO STAY.
THE ETERNALS MAY BE YEARS AWAY... AND THE NEEDS OF THIS KINGDOM MAY BE GREAT SOONER OR LATER.
I'LL MISS YOU MOST OF ALL, JADE DRAGON. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.
GOOD-BYE, KAREN. THIS PLACE'LL BE EVEN STUFFIER WITHOUT YOU.
I'M SO RELIEVED THAT YOU AREN'T GOING, SIR JACK.
MY PLACE IS HERE, LUNA, WITH YOU. IN THE SERVICE OF THE KING.
I'M SO SORRY, LADY MEDUSA. I KNOW THAT MY COMING BACK AFTER YOU'VE BEEN MARRIED TO...TO BRIAN UPSETS EVERYTHING.
BUT BRIAN LOVES ME, MORE THAN ANYTHING, AND I THINK IT WOULD BE BEST IF YOU LEFT.
THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS FOR THIS, MEGGAN. YOU ARE RIGHT. THE KING CANNOT HAVE THREE QUEENS.
THREE?


"YOU SEE, MEGGAN, A KING HAS ONE QUEEN EVEN BEFORE HE HAS GIVEN HIMSELF OVER TO A BRIDE.
"HE IS MARRIED TO HIS PEOPLE, HIS COUNTRY. HIS VOWS THERE ARE GREATER THAN THOSE HE CAN GIVE TO ANY ONE PERSON.
"AND THAT IS WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE A KING. AND EVEN HARDER TO BE A QUEEN.
"HE IS NOT ALLOWED TO LOVE YOU MORE THAN ANYTHING...
"...HE HAS GIVEN UP ALL RIGHTS TO HIMSELF.
"I WILL LEAVE, MEGGAN. YOU MARRIED HIM FIRST, AFTER ALL.
"BUT I FEAR THIS WILL NOT MAKE YOU HAPPY.
"MUCH HAS CHANGED IN THIS WORLD...AND IT WILL REQUIRE MUCH OF YOU TO BE QUEEN TO A KING AS NOBLE AS BRIAN.
"HE IS A MAN OF SORROWS... AND MUST BE, FOR HIS PEOPLE'S SAKE."


I KNOW THAT, INHUMAN. I CAN BE ANYTHING BRIAN WANTS ME TO BE. I WAS A QUEEN BEFORE, YOU KNOW...
THAT IS GOOD, MEGGAN. YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU.

YOUR HIGHNESS! THE FANTASTIC FOUR APPROACH!
RICHARDS? WHY NOW?


REED SENT US TO WARN YOU, KING BRIAN!
JUDE IS FREE!

HE WAS SUPPOSED TO RELIEVE ALL THOSE SUFFERING IN THE HOSPITALS...
...BUT HE'S FREE AND GOING TO KILL EVERYBODY! REED SAID YOU WOULD KNOW WHAT TO DO.

I WOULD?

I DON'T UNDERSTAND...YOU'LL NEED MY STRENGTH IN THERE.
I'M AFRAID REED THINKS IN RETROSPECT THAT KING BRITAIN WILL NEED YOUR STRENGTH, REJECT.
REED WANTS YOU TO TAKE THE GRIMM FAMILY TO ENGLAND WITH YOU.
C'MON, HYPERION... YER GOING TO DIE IN THERE, BIG BUDDY. WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANTED.
ME? EVEN IF I GET CURED...EVEN IF I GET TO BE HUMAN AGAIN, I'LL TURN INTA SOME KINDA FREAKIN' MUTANT. WHAT'S THE USE OF THAT?
YOU SAID IT, 'PUTER. LOOKS LIKE I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO'S GOING TO GO WITHOUT GETTING THEIR WISH.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MANNING?
ONCE MORE INTA THE BRITCHES, HUH, 'LICIA-BABY?
OH, BEN, PLEASE... COME BACK TO ME.
HEY, DAD, WE KNOW YOU'RE STRONGER THAN THE HULK!
YEAH. YOU ROCK.
NOW I CAN DIE HAPPY.
DON'T SAY THAT, BEN. NEVER SAY THAT, DARLING.

SPEAKIN' O' THE BIG-BRAIN, WHERE'S STRETCH?
HE'S ARMORING UP FOR THE TRIP, BEN.

THIS I'VE GOT TO SEE.

I KNOW YOU GUYS ARE GETTIN' READY TO GO BACK TO THE 30TH CENTURY AN' ALL, BUT I'VE BEEN WONDERING--WHERE'S NIKKI?
"NIKKI" WHO?

OH WAIT, I KNOW THIS ONE, TOO. YOU'RE THE GUARDIANS BEFORE NIKKI JOINED THE TEAM, RIGHT? YOU HAVEN'T EVEN WON YOUR WAR IN THE FUTURE YET, RIGHT? EARTH'S STILL IN DANGER?
SO YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A WAY TO...LET'S SEE...NO, NOT CLONE, DON'T EVEN SAY THE WORD CLONE...
...NO, YOU WANT TO MUTATE AND EMPOWER THE PEOPLE OF EARTH SO THAT THEY CAN DEFEND THEMSELVES AGAINST SOME ALIEN INVADERS, RIGHT? AN' THAT'S WHY YOU'RE HERE.
REALLY, IT'S NOT THAT HARD...WHEN YOU'RE DOING THIS AS LONG AS I HAVE, IT'S KIND OF DIFFICULT TO BE SURPRISED BY A TWIST LIKE THAT ANYMORE.
I WANT YOU TO KNOW, MAJOR ASTRO, THAT I CAN HELP YOU EMPOWER THE PEOPLE OF YOUR TIME. I'VE HAD SOME EXPERIENCE IN MY OWN TIME WITH RADIATION.

HUBBA, HUBBA, HUBBA!
OPEN THE PORTAL, BEN. LET'S GO TALK TO GOD.
4
"In the dream of the man who was dreaming, the dreamed man awoke." — Jorge Luis Borges, *The Circular Ruins*

P A R A D I S E X

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER EIGHT

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

DAREDEVIL

"Daredevil?"

"Who's there? Is that you, Jude? Keep away, do you hear me?! Keep away!!!"

"No. It's me, Aaron."

"Y-y-you're not Jude?"

"No."

"Thank God."

"Thank God?"

"Thank God."

"I don't understand. I thought you would have preferred Jude to be here. I thought you would have wanted his touch? Don't you want to die anymore?"

"It's complicated. Why did you want to talk to me? How did you know I didn't go along with Reed? How did you know I stayed here in the castle?"

"I see everything that goes on on Earth. I watched as Reed, Hank, Susan, Ben and you all ran from Jude and Mephisto. I watched how you all transported away, except for you Daredevils, who remained behind. I watched as Jude took each one of you… with one exception."

"Yeah, well, then you saw what happened when the last me, I mean, the Daredevil before me, was touched. You saw and heard him scream like that."

"I did."

"But it's not right. I've been waiting so long. If they were total duplicates of me, why did he scream? He should have enjoyed it. He should have called out to me to share in the experience instead of telling me to stay away. Why would I do that to me? How could I after so long? This was right. I should have joined him. I should have leapt at the chance."

"So why did you hide from Jude?"

"He shouldn't have screamed. I shouldn't have screamed like that."

"I know who you are. I do. I know how much you've tried to keep that secret. How much you've tried to be determined by the crowd and the cheers of your own propaganda machine."

"Who are you to tell me…"

"Well, as you can see, I know rather a lot about machines. You were not a super hero. You did not have powers before the plague granted everyone on Earth super humanity. Everyone thinks you were a hero because of the name Daredevil. But it's not true. You were never one. And you still are not a hero."

"What do you mean by that? I fought against the Skull. I took a stand against those wackos from the church of Immortus. They ripped me to shreds. I allowed myself… my selves to be Reed Richards' guinea pigs while he was figuring out a humane version of death. I did all these things and all it got me was a stage show that doesn't

pay the bills any longer. I've experienced death, sure. The death of a showman. I was killed by the ratings before Jude even showed up."

"That's just it, though. All you did, you did in exchange for ratings, or for a chance to die, or for the opportunity to satisfy your own sense of importance. Do you know who the first Daredevil was?"

"I heard of him, sure. The Man without Fear."

"That's what they called him. But the truth was that he was afraid. In fact he knew fear in a way no one else did. He was a blind man."

"Blind?"

"Yes. An accident when he was a child robbed him of his sight. It also awakened certain other abilities within him. He studied and read by day and became a lawyer. But by night, he was a vigilante, one who would have been condemned by the very law he championed by day — a hero who fought those who were able to get the law to turn a blind eye to them. He was a contradiction in terms. And he was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"The original Daredevil made a promise to his father that he would not fight, that he'd become someone important. A doctor… a lawyer. But while he did become a lawyer, he also fought. The original Daredevil was afraid that it was his fault that more than one woman he loved died at the hands of his enemies. He was afraid that it was not safe for him to love. Yet still, he continued to love. He was afraid that he was not that different from those he fought, those that reinterpreted the law for their own ends, as he did himself. Yet still he fought them. The original Daredevil was afraid that he was a fraud, only pretending to be a hero, not certain of his own motivations. Yet still he did what needed to be done to protect the people in his city."

"Am I supposed to be understanding something here? He sounds pretty confused to me. Messed up worse than me."

"That's the point, Daredevil. He would seem messed up to you. You can't see that the promises he made to people were promises that he should never have made. He promised his father that he wouldn't fight, but his city needed a fighter. Those women he loved, he promised to protect, and he did although it wasn't safe for him to continue loving either. Those who condemned his actions or claimed that he was the same as they, he continued to defend or oppose. In every one of these cases, his human needs, his professional ambitions and most personal relationships became secondary to the needs of all those around him. He only looked confused because there aren't that many of us willing to sacrifice what we hold dear for something dearer still."

"So you think I should what? Become a super hero… save the day… let Jude touch me… not be afraid… what?"

"I think that if you're ever going to do anything but play to empty showrooms, you need to quit thinking about yourself. It was funny for a while. But it's played itself out. If you want to make a difference in this world, if you want me to take notice of you as opposed to the millions of lies I watch every day, you better do something spectacular. As it was, I was watching Reed Richards and just happened to notice you didn't follow him. I doubt anyone else did."

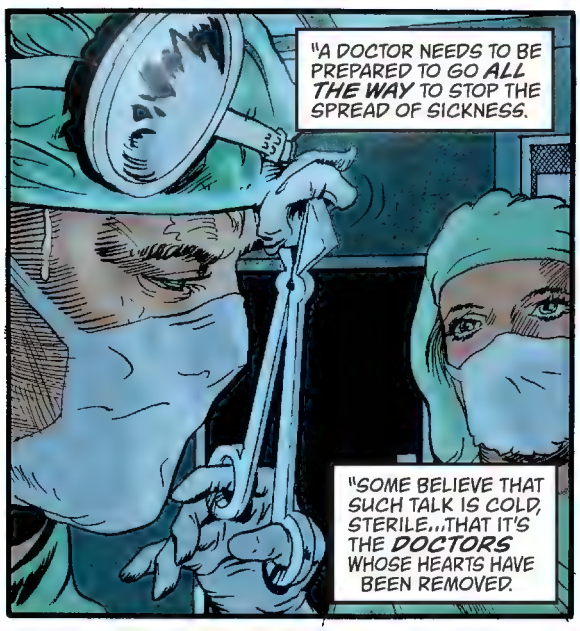
"Shut up. I can't believe I'm being given the catholic treatment by a toaster on legs. I want to live. And living isn't going to happen if I'm doing the hero thing, dying for others. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah…"

"It's funny, 'Daredevil,' the original DD, got his name from a bunch of bullies that saw him as nothing but a coward. Perhaps you deserve this name after all. Hope you enjoy your time here in Castle Doom. But don't expect any crowds. There's nothing they're going to want to see here."

"Is that what you think? Hey where'd you go? Oh, I get it, you went back to the citadel. Fine. Bang… zoom… to the moon. I don't need you. I don't need you to tell me that I haven't done anything with my life. I don't need you to tell me that I'm not worth watching unless I do something special and heroic. Because I don't wear the 'Do-Gooder' patch. You're not even alive, robot. Did you ever think of that? Huh? You're not even alive. Who are you to tell me I have a choice to make? Robots don't have choices. They're just robots. Yeah. Just robots. Have you ever thought of that? Have you ever…"

PARADISE X:RAGNARÖK ONE

"I BECAME A SURGEON TO HELP PEOPLE WHO COULDN'T HELP THEMSELVES.
"SOMETIMES DISEASE CAN ONLY BE STOPPED BY AN OUTSIDE HAND BECOMING AN INTERNAL VIOLENCE.
"SOMETIMES A KNIFE OR BLADE IS THE MEANS TO HEALING.

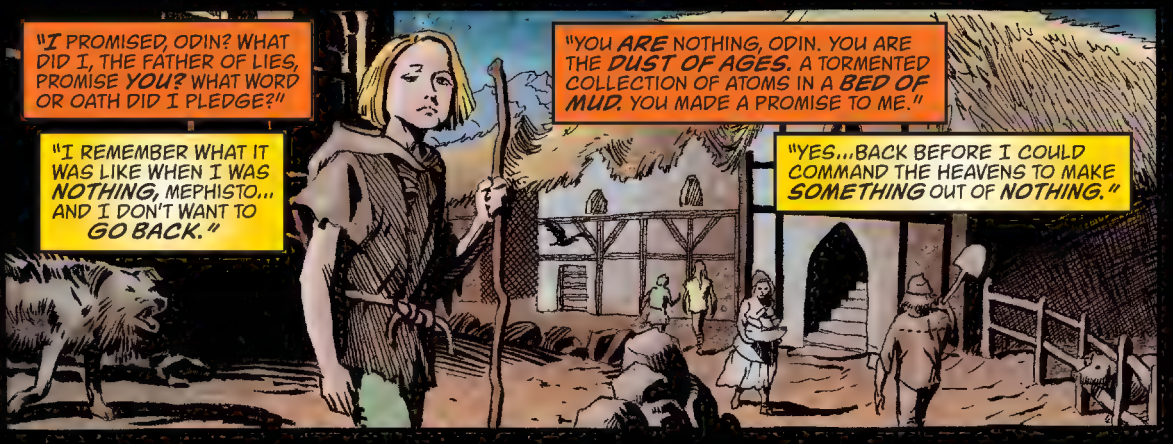

"A DOCTOR NEEDS TO BE PREPARED TO GO ALL THE WAY TO STOP THE SPREAD OF SICKNESS.
"SOME BELIEVE THAT SUCH TALK IS COLD, STERILE...THAT IT'S THE DOCTORS WHOSE HEARTS HAVE BEEN REMOVED.

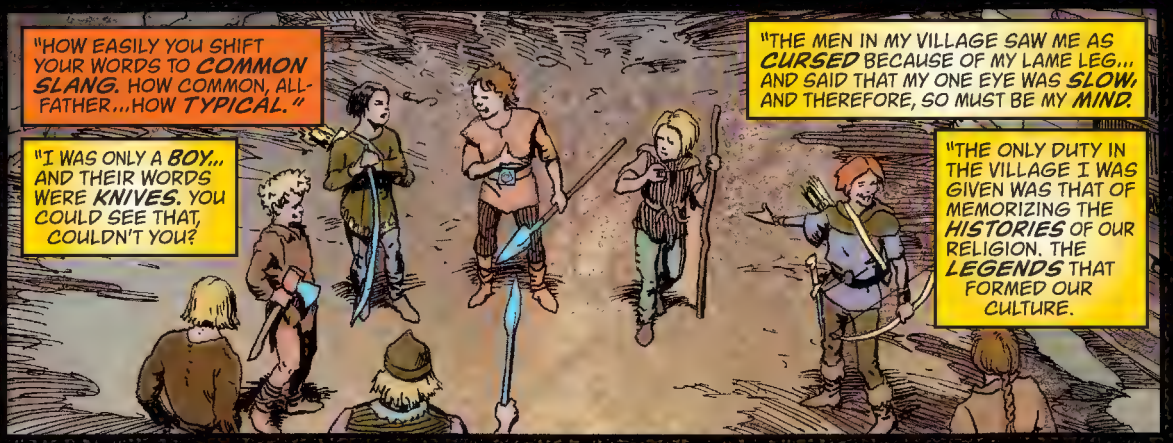
"BUT THAT'S NOT TRUE.
"WE'RE JUST NOT AFRAID TO GET BLOOD ON OUR HANDS."

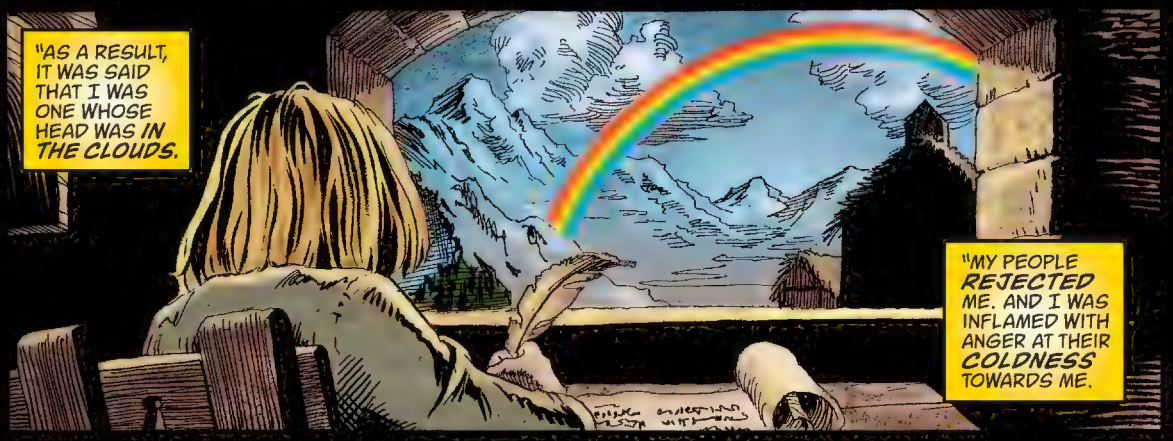
I'M STILL NOT CERTAIN I UNDERSTAND WHY I'M HERE...I SHOULD BE BACK ON THE MOON...
ODIN HAD ALL THE RECORDERS DESTROYED YEARS AGO ONCE HE LEARNED WHAT THEY WERE RECORDING. YOU WILL BE NEEDED, X-51.
HEIMDALL'S HORN WARNS ODIN'S PUPPETS OF OUR ARRIVAL. ODIN MUST EXPECT US... OTHERWISE HE'D BE HERE.
LET US HOPE THIS CHARADE CONVINCES THEM LONG ENOUGH FOR US TO ENTER THE CITY'S GATES.
OUR FORMS ARE NOT IMPORTANT... WHAT WE DO HERE IS.
THIS IS THE DAY OF RAGNAROK.

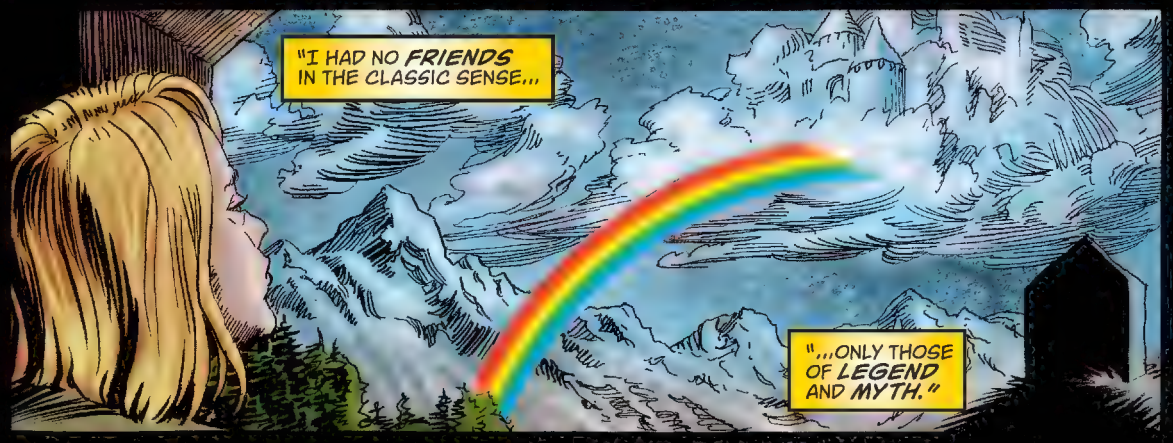
WE ARE GOING TO SHAKE THE PILLARS OF THE REALM AND BRING IT DOWN AROUND ODIN'S STINKING HEAD FOR WHAT HE DID TO US!
WE WERE PRISONERS OF HIS IMAGINATION! AND SO WE WILL IMPRISON HIM WITH THE SAME MYTHS HE USED TO LIMIT AND GIVE FORM TO US.
THOR, YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT ARMAGEDDON.
DOESN'T THIS ALL SEEM A LITTLE BLOOD-THIRSTY? YOU ESPECIALLY, THOR...
WE WOULDN'T HAVE BLOOD IF THE FAKER WHO CALLS HIMSELF ODIN DIDN'T SAY WE DID.
I CALLED HIM FATHER, WHEN HE ALLOWED IT.
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT IT'S LIKE TO THINK A MAN IS YOUR FATHER WHEN YOU AND HE AREN'T EVEN THE SAME RACE?
THAT YOUR SONSHIP WAS ALL DUE TO HIS THOUGHTS AND AGENDAS?
I DO, THOR. AND YET IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME. IT GIVES ME REASON TO EXIST. I WONDER IF THE PAST IS A THING ANY OF US CAN ESCAPE...
THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR, X-51. YOU'RE JUST RECORDING IT.

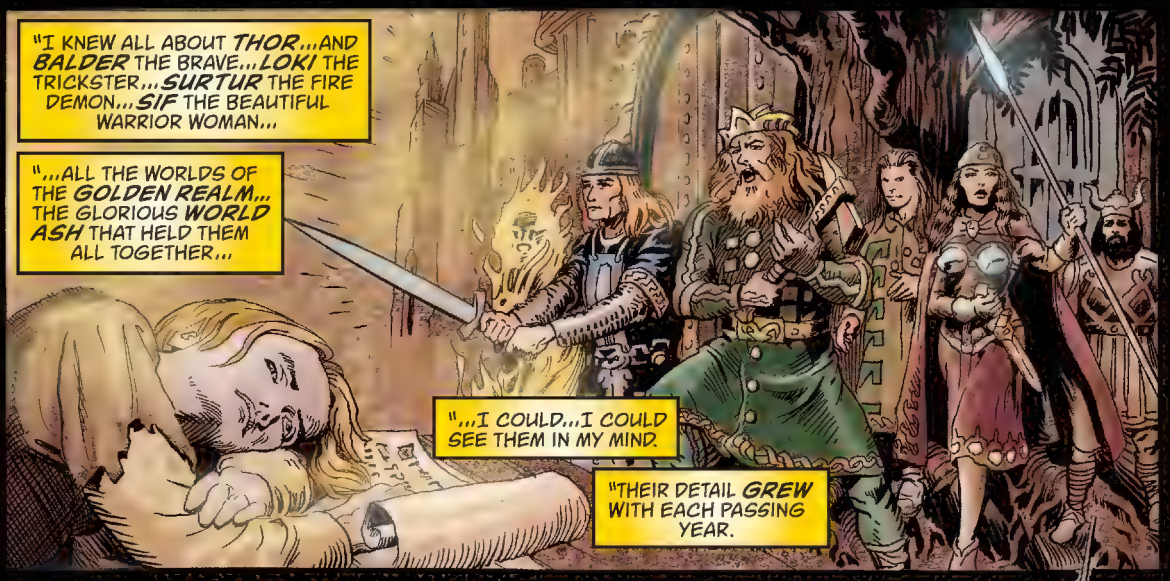
JUST ONE LAST QUESTION...WHAT MAKES THIS RAGNAROK DIFFERENT FROM ANY OF THE OTHERS I'VE HEARD ABOUT?
BECAUSE THIS TIME, IT'S NOT UP TO ODIN TO DECIDE. THE CHOICE WILL NOT BE HIS AS TO WHO SURVIVES...
...WE WILL FREE OUR PEOPLE.
AND SO THE END FINALLY COMES...EH, MEPHISTO?
CERTAINLY NOT AN END FOR YOU, THOUGH. YOU SEEM TO ALWAYS HAVE YOUR EYES ON AN ESCAPE ROUTE.
HOW COULD IT HAVE COME TO THIS?
YOU PROMISED, DEVIL. YOU PROMISED THIS WOULD NOT HAPPEN. THAT IT COULD NOT.

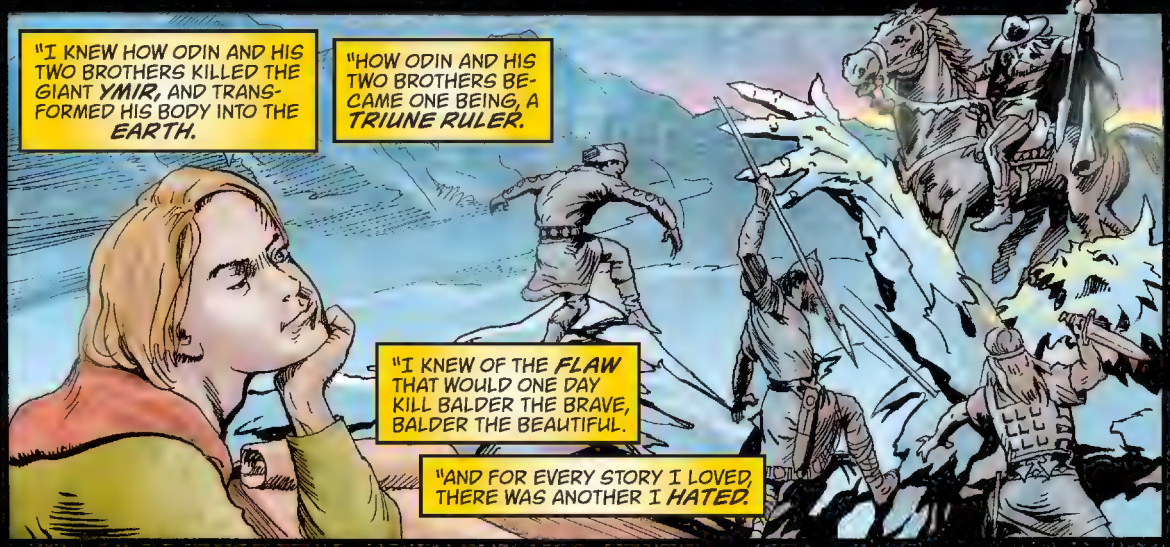

"I PROMISED, ODIN? WHAT DID I, THE FATHER OF LIES, PROMISE YOU? WHAT WORD OR OATH DID I PLEDGE?"
"I REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHEN I WAS NOTHING, MEPHISTO... AND I DON'T WANT TO GO BACK."
"YOU ARE NOTHING, ODIN. YOU ARE THE DUST OF AGES. A TORMENTED COLLECTION OF ATOMS IN A BED OF MUD. YOU MADE A PROMISE TO ME."
"YES...BACK BEFORE I COULD COMMAND THE HEAVENS TO MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING."

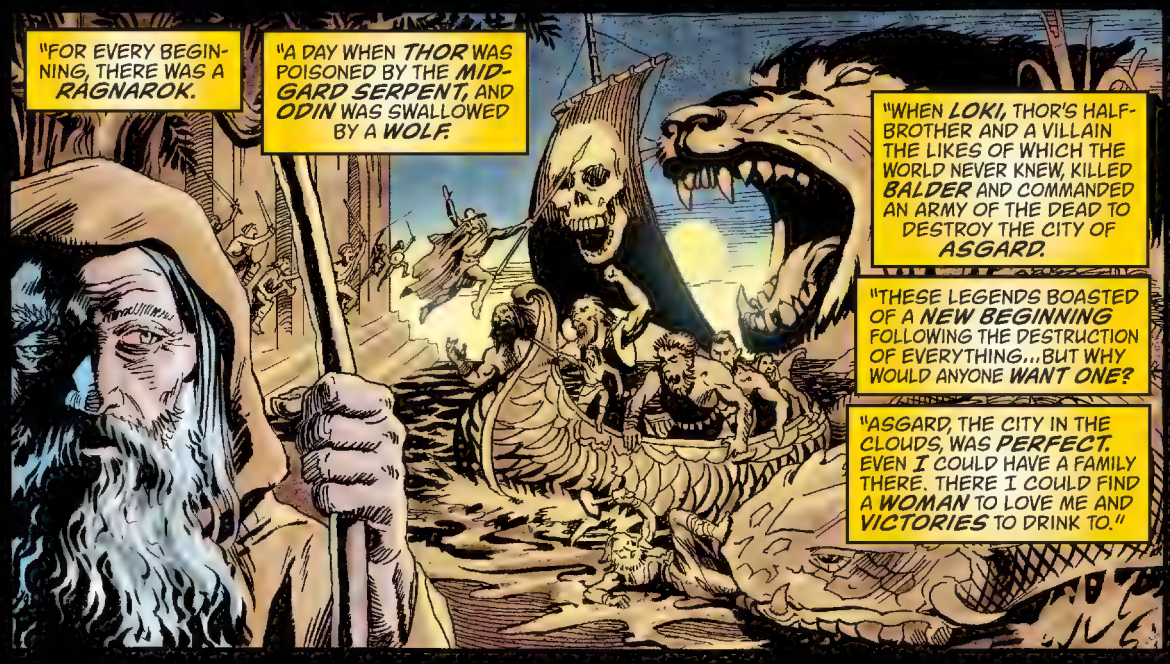

"HOW EASILY YOU SHIFT YOUR WORDS TO COMMON SLANG. HOW COMMON, ALL-FATHER...HOW TYPICAL."
"I WAS ONLY A BOY... AND THEIR WORDS WERE KNIVES. YOU COULD SEE THAT, COULDN'T YOU?
"THE MEN IN MY VILLAGE SAW ME AS CURSED BECAUSE OF MY LAME LEG... AND SAID THAT MY ONE EYE WAS SLOW, AND THEREFORE, SO MUST BE MY MIND.
"THE ONLY DUTY IN THE VILLAGE I WAS GIVEN WAS THAT OF MEMORIZING THE HISTORIES OF OUR RELIGION. THE LEGENDS THAT FORMED OUR CULTURE.

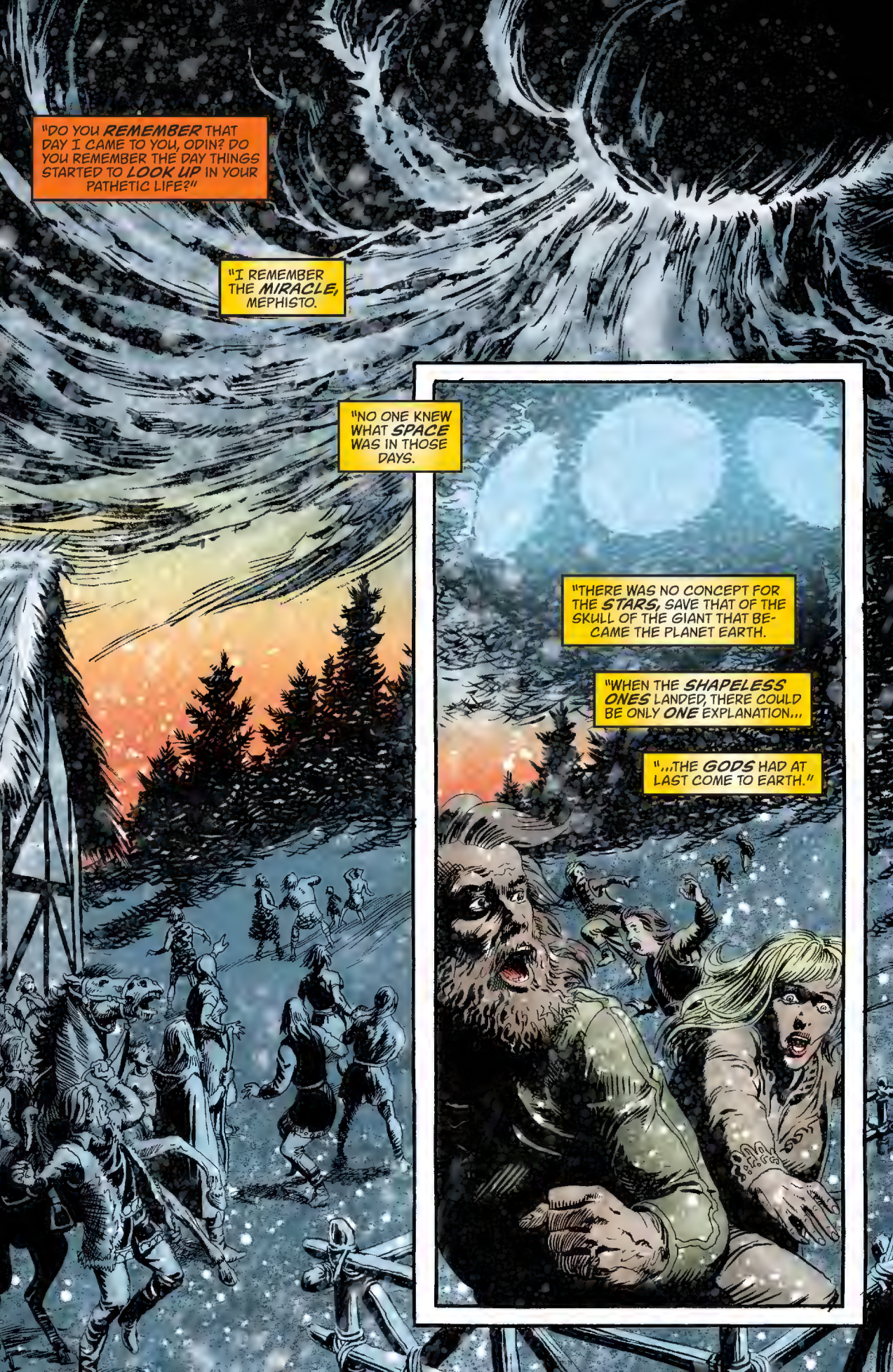

"AS A RESULT, IT WAS SAID THAT I WAS ONE WHOSE HEAD WAS IN THE CLOUDS.
"MY PEOPLE REJECTED ME. AND I WAS INFLAMED WITH ANGER AT THEIR COLDNESS TOWARDS ME.


"I HAD NO FRIENDS IN THE CLASSIC SENSE...
"...ONLY THOSE OF LEGEND AND MYTH."


"I KNEW ALL ABOUT THOR...AND BALDER THE BRAVE...LOKI THE TRICKSTER...SURTUR THE FIRE DEMON...SIF THE BEAUTIFUL WARRIOR WOMAN...
"...ALL THE WORLDS OF THE GOLDEN REALM... THE GLORIOUS WORLD ASH THAT HELD THEM ALL TOGETHER...
"...I COULD...I COULD SEE THEM IN MY MIND.
"THEIR DETAIL GREW WITH EACH PASSING YEAR.


"I KNEW HOW ODIN AND HIS TWO BROTHERS KILLED THE GIANT YMIR, AND TRANSFORMED HIS BODY INTO THE EARTH.
"HOW ODIN AND HIS TWO BROTHERS BECAME ONE BEING, A TRIUNE RULER.
"I KNEW OF THE FLAW THAT WOULD ONE DAY KILL BALDER THE BRAVE, BALDER THE BEAUTIFUL.
"AND FOR EVERY STORY I LOVED, THERE WAS ANOTHER I HATED.

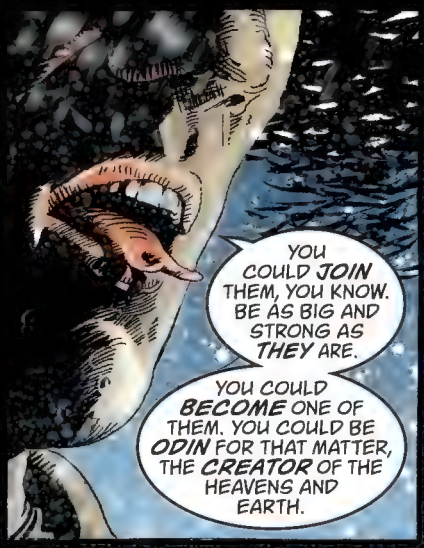

"FOR EVERY BEGINNING, THERE WAS A RAGNAROK.
"A DAY WHEN THOR WAS POISONED BY THE MIDGARD SERPENT, AND ODIN WAS SWALLOWED BY A WOLF.
"WHEN LOKI, THOR'S HALF-BROTHER AND A VILLAIN THE LIKES OF WHICH THE WORLD NEVER KNEW, KILLED BALDER AND COMMANDED AN ARMY OF THE DEAD TO DESTROY THE CITY OF ASGARD.
"THESE LEGENDS BOASTED OF A NEW BEGINNING FOLLOWING THE DESTRUCTION OF EVERYTHING...BUT WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT ONE?
"ASGARD, THE CITY IN THE CLOUDS, WAS PERFECT. EVEN I COULD HAVE A FAMILY THERE. THERE I COULD FIND A WOMAN TO LOVE ME AND VICTORIES TO DRINK TO."


"DO YOU REMEMBER THAT DAY I CAME TO YOU, ODIN? DO YOU REMEMBER THE DAY THINGS STARTED TO LOOK UP IN YOUR PATHETIC LIFE?"
"I REMEMBER THE MIRACLE, MEPHISTO.
"NO ONE KNEW WHAT SPACE WAS IN THOSE DAYS.
"THERE WAS NO CONCEPT FOR THE STARS, SAVE THAT OF THE SKULL OF THE GIANT THAT BECAME THE PLANET EARTH.
"WHEN THE SHAPELESS ONES LANDED, THERE COULD BE ONLY ONE EXPLANATION...
"...THE GODS HAD AT LAST COME TO EARTH."

"MY VILLAGE FEARED THE GODS BECAUSE THEY DID NOT KNOW THEM. THEY KNEW ONLY WRATH AND ANGER AND FEAR.
"THEY KNEW NOTHING OF HEROISM.
"BUT THIS WAS THE DAY WHEN THEY AT LAST SAW MY COURAGE.
"THIS WAS THE DAY THEY SAW ME FOR WHAT I TRULY WAS."
"AND PERHAPS IT WAS THE DAY I STOPPED SEEING YOU FOR WHAT YOU TRULY WERE."

WELCOME, GODS OF OUR CREATION!
WELCOME TO THE LAND OF YOUR MAKING AND THE PEOPLE OF YOUR FORGING!
WELCOME, THOR!
WELCOME, BALDER!
WELCOME, HEIMDALL!
WELCOME...
...I HAVE WAITED SO LONG TO SEE YOU.
WELCOME TO MIDGARD.
"YES...YOUR FAITH FORMED THEM, ODIN. YOUR 'WANT' FOR A BETTER WORLD THAN THE ONE YOU EXPERIENCED MOLDED THEM INTO THE GODS OF YOUR FABLES.
"YOUR WANT FOR LOVE. FOR WOMEN. FOR RICHES. FOR GLORY BEYOND YOUR IMAGININGS."

"IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER THIS THAT YOU CAME TO ME..."

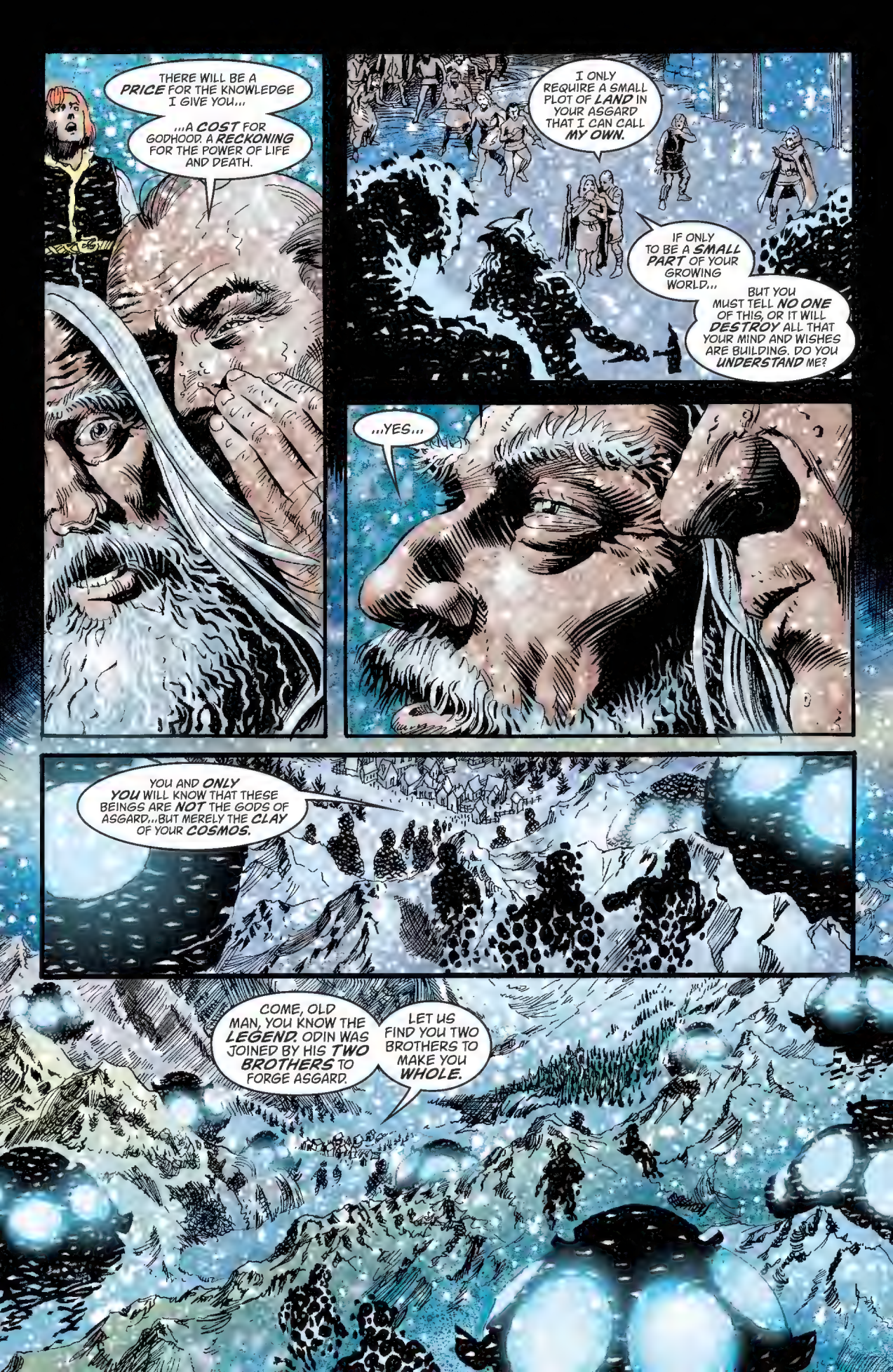

YOU COULD JOIN THEM, YOU KNOW. BE AS BIG AND STRONG AS THEY ARE.
YOU COULD BECOME ONE OF THEM. YOU COULD BE ODIN FOR THAT MATTER, THE CREATOR OF THE HEAVENS AND EARTH.

BUT...BUT I AM ONLY A MAN.
FROM YOUR LIPS THE GODS TAKE FORM.
FROM YOUR FAITH, THEY SPRING TO LIFE.
IS THERE ANY REASON WHY YOU SHOULDN'T BE THEIR ALL-FATHER? THEIR ODIN?

I...I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW I COULD BE ODIN. WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

DON'T BE CONCERNED WITH HOW...ARE YOU WILLING TO RULE, TO HOLD THE KINGDOM OF ASGARD TOGETHER BY YOUR THOUGHTS ALONE?

OF COURSE.

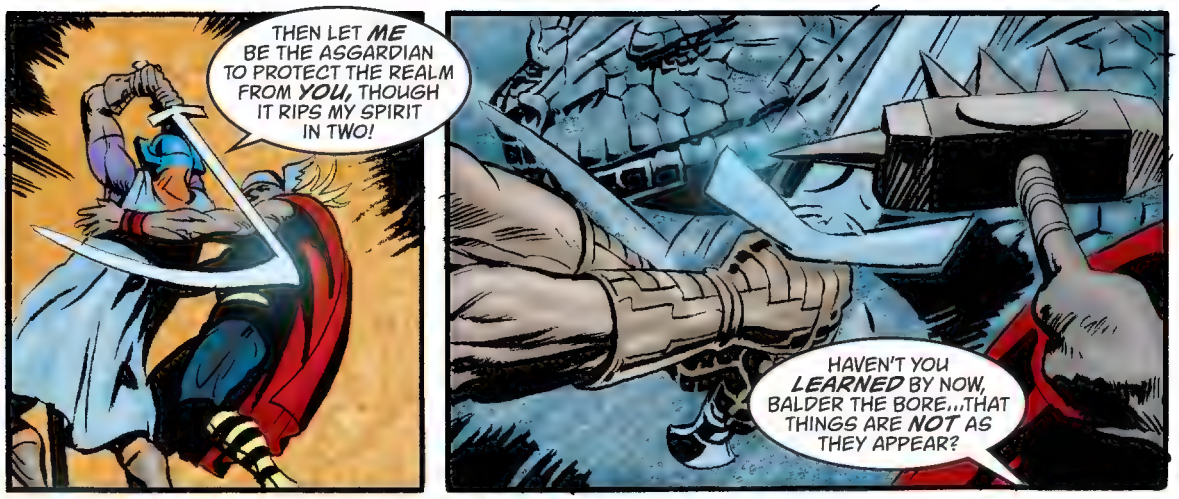

THERE WILL BE A PRICE FOR THE KNOWLEDGE I GIVE YOU...
...A COST FOR GODHOOD. A RECKONING FOR THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH.
I ONLY REQUIRE A SMALL PLOT OF LAND IN YOUR ASGARD THAT I CAN CALL MY OWN.
IF ONLY TO BE A SMALL PART OF YOUR GROWING WORLD...
BUT YOU MUST TELL NO ONE OF THIS, OR IT WILL DESTROY ALL THAT YOUR MIND AND WISHES ARE BUILDING. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?
...YES...
YOU AND ONLY YOU WILL KNOW THAT THESE BEINGS ARE NOT THE GODS OF ASGARD...BUT MERELY THE CLAY OF YOUR COSMOS.
COME, OLD MAN, YOU KNOW THE LEGEND. ODIN WAS JOINED BY HIS TWO BROTHERS TO FORGE ASGARD.
LET US FIND YOU TWO BROTHERS TO MAKE YOU WHOLE.

"I REMEMBER WHERE I PLANNED TO BUILD ASGARD.
"I REMEMBER BUILDING IT OUT OF THE VERY BEINGS THAT HAD BECOME MY SONS AND BROTHERS.
"MY CHILDREN."
"AND THEY CALL ME THE FATHER OF LIES."
"I REMEMBER PLANTING A TREE, THE WORLD ASH, WHICH WOULD GROW FOREVER, A LIVING SYMBOL OF THE NEW FAMILY I HAD CREATED FOR MYSELF.
"AND WHEN I THOUGHT OF THE LIFE I ONCE LIVED UPON EARTH, AND THE JEERS I'D RECEIVED FROM MY FELLOW NORSEMEN, I RAINED DOWN THUNDER UPON THEM FOR THE REST OF HUMAN HISTORY.
"AND I WAS HAPPY.
"FOR THERE WOULD BE NO RAGNAROK IN MY REALM. AT LEAST, NOT ONE I COULDN'T AVERT.
"MY ASGARD WOULD NEVER CHANGE."

I KNOW THIS ALIEN RACE THAT BECAME THE ASGARDIANS HAD MUTATED TO A POINT WHERE THEIR IDENTITIES COULD ONLY BE FORMED OUT OF THE OPINIONS AND BELIEFS OF OTHER RACES.
I KNOW JUSTICE HAS TO BE BROUGHT TO ODIN. BUT IS THIS REALM SO WRONG? THERE'S SUCH BEAUTY HERE...
LISTEN, ROBOT. EVERYTHING THAT SHINES ISN'T ALWAYS THE GOLDEN REALM. MY 'FATHER' HAS PLAYED WITH OUR LIVES, MANIPULATING US OVER AND OVER AGAIN FOR EONS.
WE NEVER HAD A CHOICE. FOR GOOD OR EVIL.
WHEN HE CURSED THOR TO BECOME THE HUMAN DONALD BLAKE SO MANY YEARS AGO, WHEN HE DAMNED HIM TO LEARN HUMILITY, HE DID IT NOT BECAUSE THOR WAS PROUD...
...BUT BECAUSE THOR STOOD UP TO HIM ON A DAY WHEN HE HAD DECIDED TO DESTROY THE EARTH.
WE ARE HERE BECAUSE ONE FLAWED MAN SHOULD NOT HAVE THIS MUCH POWER.
TELL THAT TO FRANKLIN RICHARDS.
BROTHER THOR!
WHEN MINE EARS FIRST PARTOOK OF THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU WERE RETURNING, MY HEART DID DANCE WITH JOY!
ODIN TOLD ME YOU HAD BEEN BEWITCHED...
...BUT I SEE NOW THAT YOU HAVE INSTEAD FREED ASGARD FROM THE FEAR OF RAGNAROK!
FIRST YOU FREED US FROM HEL, NOW YOU FREE US FROM FEAR.
I COULDN'T HAVE SAID IT BETTER MYSELF!

T-THOR?
BALDER?
ODIN WAS RIGHT, FOR ONCE. I AM NOT MYSELF.
OH, TEARS OF JOYOUS ACCLAMATION, WHY HAVE YOU BECOME A RIVER OF SORROW?
ODIN HAS A LOT TO ANSWER FOR. THE FIRST THING BEING THE STUPID WAY HE MADE US TALK.
SO TAKE A HINT AND SHUT UP.
I CANNOT ACCEPT THESE WORDS, THESE FALSEHOODS... THOR WOULD NOT BETRAY HIS PEOPLE...
...THOR WOULD NOT KILL ME...HE IS THE MOST PERFECT OF GODS...HIS WORDS BE THE--
GET UP, BALDER. AND YOU'RE RIGHT. THOR WOULD NOT DO THAT.

THIS IS RAGNAROK, BALDER. YOU KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU STAY HERE.
GO. AND TELL THE OLD MAN THAT HIS STORIES WILL NOT SAVE HIM.
BUT THOR... HOW CAN THE MIDGARD SERPENT AND FENRIS BE THY ALLIES IN THIS ILL-FATED CAMPAIGN?
HOW CAN YOU SURRENDER THE KEYS TO THE GOLDEN REALM INTO THEIR POSSESSION?
YOU'VE POISONED HIM WITH THY WORDS, SERPENT!
THAT'S ONLY APPROPRIATE, BALDER...
...FOR ON THE DAY OF RAGNAROK, I DIE BY THE POISON OF THE MIDGARD SERPENT.
WHILE YOU ARE SLAIN BY LOKI.

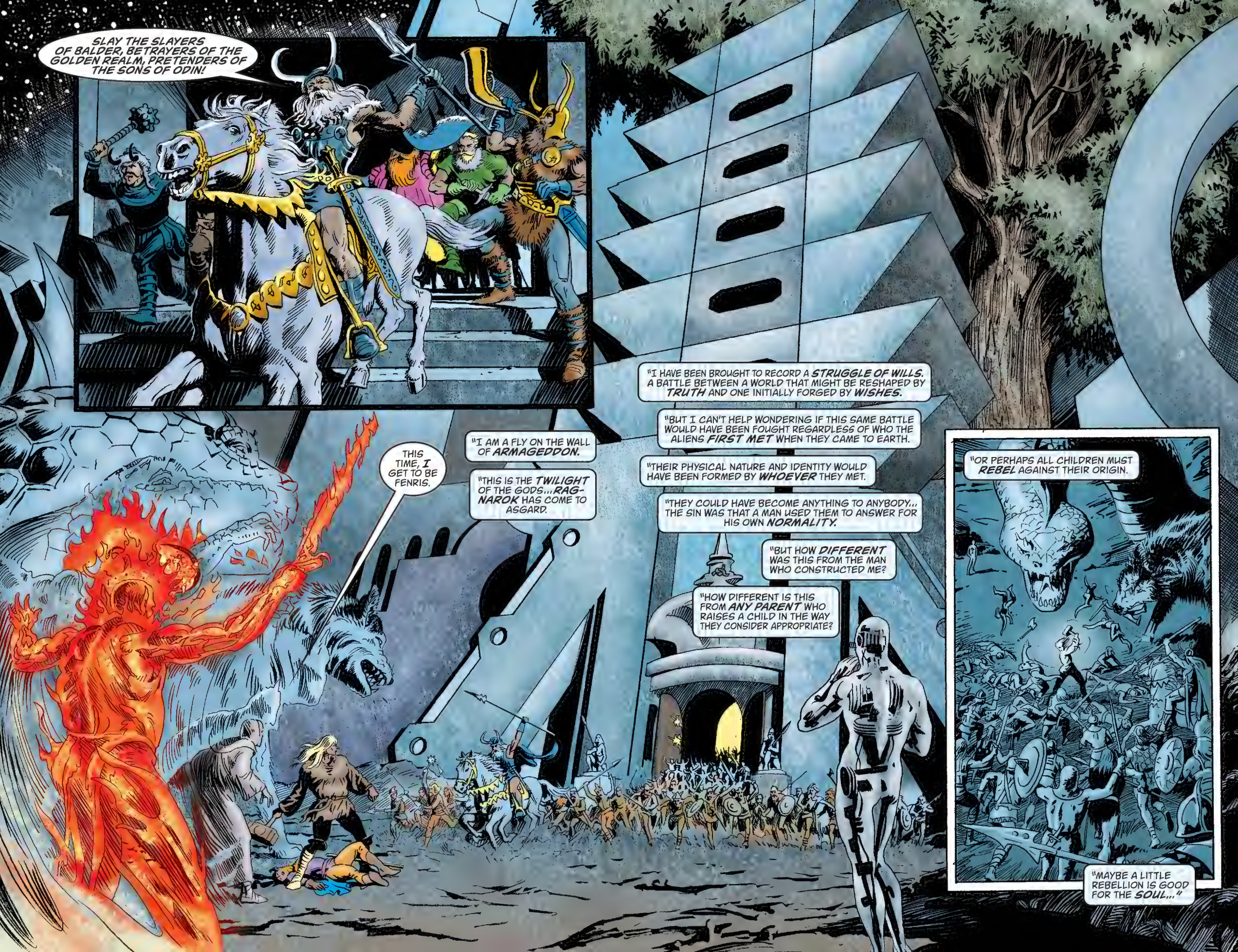

THEN LET ME BE THE ASGARDIAN TO PROTECT THE REALM FROM YOU, THOUGH IT RIPS MY SPIRIT IN TWO!
HAVEN'T YOU LEARNED BY NOW, BALDER THE BORE...THAT THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY APPEAR?

I WEEP FOR THE MAN YOU ONCE WERE!
THE FRIEND I ONCE HAD!

THE MAN I ONCE WAS?

L-LOKI?
WHAT ARE YOU--?
I REALLY DON'T WANT TO DO THIS, BALDER... BUT A PROPHECY JUST ISN'T A PROPHECY IF IT DOESN'T COME TRUE!
NOOOOOO! ÷UNNFFH÷

BUT THERE IS NO HEL...WE WERE FREED...
NO. THERE IS NO BALDER...
YOU ARE FREED.
SEE, NO BLOOD.
NO BLOOD?
SO...YOU'RE NOT HERE TO KILL ME? YOU DON'T SEEK THE DESTRUCTION OF THE GOLDEN REALM?
ONLY THE DESTRUCTION OF THAT WHICH ISN'T TRULY GOLDEN, FRIEND BALDER.
I DON'T THINK THE DISGUISES ARE NECESSARY ANYMORE.
THERE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A RAGNAROK. WE'RE BOUND BY THE FEAR OF A DAY THAT HAS NO REASON TO COME.
IS THIS THE TRUTH?
WHAT? NO, THIS IS WRONG. FRIEND BALDER, I...
BALDER?
HELLO, FATHER. SO THAT'S THE WAY IT'S GOING TO BE.


SLAY THE SLAYERS OF BALDER, BETRAYERS OF THE GOLDEN REALM, PRETENDERS OF THE SONS OF ODIN!
THIS TIME, I GET TO BE FENRIS.
"I AM A FLY ON THE WALL OF ARMAGEDDON.
"THIS IS THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS...RAGNAROK HAS COME TO ASGARD.
"I HAVE BEEN BROUGHT TO RECORD A STRUGGLE OF WILLS. A BATTLE BETWEEN A WORLD THAT MIGHT BE RESHAPED BY TRUTH AND ONE INITIALLY FORGED BY WISHES.
"BUT I CAN'T HELP WONDERING IF THIS SAME BATTLE WOULD HAVE BEEN FOUGHT REGARDLESS OF WHO THE ALIENS FIRST MET WHEN THEY CAME TO EARTH.
"THEIR PHYSICAL NATURE AND IDENTITY WOULD HAVE BEEN FORMED BY WHOEVER THEY MET.
"THEY COULD HAVE BECOME ANYTHING TO ANYBODY... THE SIN WAS THAT A MAN USED THEM TO ANSWER FOR HIS OWN NORMALITY.
"BUT HOW DIFFERENT WAS THIS FROM THE MAN WHO CONSTRUCTED ME?
"HOW DIFFERENT IS THIS FROM ANY PARENT WHO RAISES A CHILD IN THE WAY THEY CONSIDER APPROPRIATE?
"OR PERHAPS ALL CHILDREN MUST REBEL AGAINST THEIR ORIGIN.
"MAYBE A LITTLE REBELLION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL..."

"...THAT IS, IF A GOD WHOSE EXISTENCE WAS SHAPED BY HUMAN IMAGINATION EVEN HAS A SOUL."
MY... "SONS" STRIKE THEIR FELLOW ASGARDIANS DOWN AND THEN WISH THEM BACK TO LIFE!
THEY ARE GAINING IN NUMBER! SOON ALL WE HAVE BUILT HERE WILL BE FOR NOTHING!
I AM GROWING TIRED OF WILLING DEATH UPON THOSE I GAVE LIFE AND FORM TO.
NO... DON'T TELL ME THAT, MEPHISTO...
...THIS CAN'T BE THE END.
IT WON'T BE. I DID IT BEFORE. AND I CAN DO IT AGAIN...

PARADISE X:RAGNAROK TWO

THERE ARE MORE ASGARDIANS COMING.
DO YOU REALLY THINK YOUR WILLS ARE A MATCH FOR MINE?
THOR? BELOVED?
MILADY SIF?
OH, MY LOVE HAS RETURNED AT LAST!
WHAT NOW, THOR? WILL YOU KILL HER OR EMBRACE THE ILLUSION?
WILL YOU SLAY HER AS YOU DID THE OTHERS?
I WON'T SLAY HER. I WON'T SLAY ANY OF THEM.
THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH ISN'T MINE TO GIVE, FATHER...
...AND IT SHOULDN'T BE YOURS, EITHER.

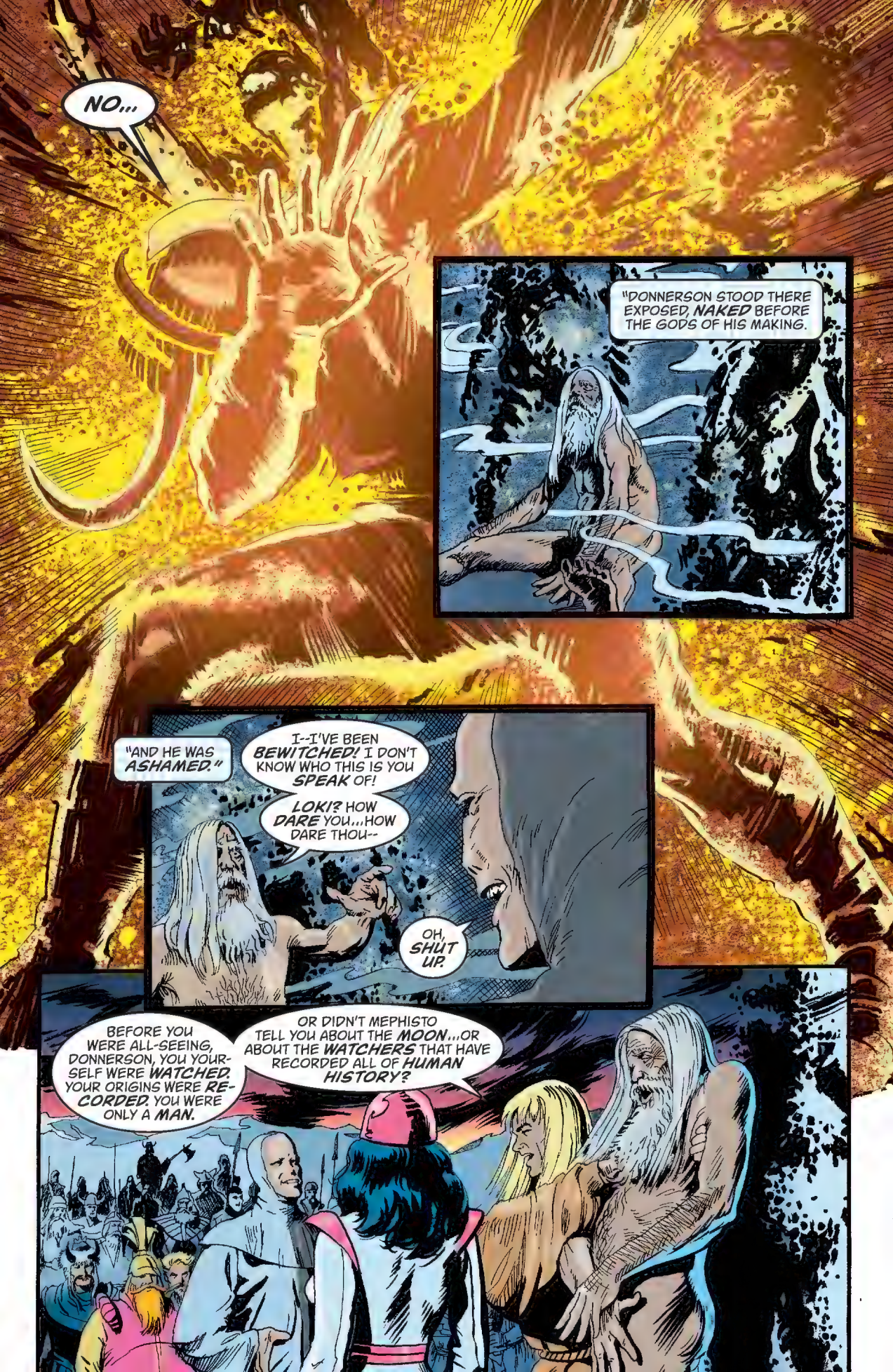
BUT IT IS, MY SON.
THE POWER IS MINE, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT.
TH--
BUT I NEVER...I WOULD NEVER...
FATHER, WHY?
I WOULD NEVER MALICIOUSLY PAIN YOU, MY SON...
...BUT THIS PAIN WILL HELP YOU REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE. IT WILL HELP YOU REMEMBER WHAT I GAVE YOU.
I GAVE YOU, ABOVE ALL, SO MUCH.
I NEVER STOPPED GIVING.
THOR?
MILADY... I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD.
THANK YOU, MY PRINCE.

YOU DON'T GET OFF THAT EASILY, ODIN, YOU OLD FOOL.
SURE YOU GAVE TO THOR, BUT WHAT ABOUT ME?
YOU MADE THIS WORLD, EVERYTHING IN IT, AND THEN YOU DECIDED THERE SHOULD BE EVIL!
WHY DID YOU MAKE ME EVIL?
BECAUSE THERE NEEDED TO BE EVIL, LOKI... FOR GOOD TO SHINE.
IT WASN'T ANYTHING PERSONAL.
NOT PERSONAL? BUT YOU MADE ME... YOU MADE ME WHO I AM!
YOU'RE MY DESIGNER. MY EVIL COMES FROM YOU... OF COURSE IT'S PERSONAL!
I'M YOUR SON, ODIN. AND LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID.

WE ARE ALL YOUR CHILDREN.
AND YOU NEVER GAVE US A CHOICE.
WHEN DID YOU EVER GIVE ANY OF US A CHOICE?
WE WERE YOUR PUPPETS.
WE FOUGHT AND DIED AND WERE BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE OVER AND OVER AGAIN FOR YOUR DAMNED COMIC BOOK NEED FOR EXCITEMENT!
I HELPED SAVE EARTH! DID YOU KNOW THAT?
I HELPED SAVE EARTH...
...CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT THAT FEELS LIKE?
TO NOT THINK OF YOURSELF, FOR EVEN A MINUTE?
I SURE DIDN'T.
WHY, FATHER? WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME?
I...
WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO US?

WE COULD HAVE DONE SO MUCH GOOD ON EARTH, FATHER. WE COULD HAVE AVERTED SO MANY WARS, FED SO MANY HUNGRY...
...BUT INSTEAD YOU KEPT US HERE, ACTING OUT YOUR FANTASIES.
THIS ISN'T ABOUT WHAT YOU DID--IT'S ABOUT WHAT YOU DIDN'T DO. WHAT YOU COULD HAVE DONE.
DO YOU EVER WONDER WHY MEPHISTO PICKED YOU?
BECAUSE HE WANTED A SMALL MAN WITH SMALL DREAMS WHO WOULD USE US FOR SMALL PURPOSES.
OR CAN'T THE ALL-SEEING ODIN SEE THAT?
NO...I WAS THE KEEPER OF THE STORIES...THE BUILDER OF GODS...
I...MEPHISTO?
WHERE ARE YOU? I NO LONGER SENSE YOUR PRESENCE.
ODIN...WAS MEPHISTO DISGUISED AS A BIRD IN THIS REALM?
NO...THE RAVENS WERE ONLY A TOOL TO BEING ALL-KNOWING.
THIS-- MY EYE IS MEPHISTO!
OR IT WAS, AT THE VERY LEAST.

I TRIED TO FREE MYSELF FROM HIM YEARS AGO, BUT THE EYE RE-TURNED. IT ALWAYS RETURNED.
WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME NOW, SATAN?
X-51, WHAT WAS THE NAME THAT ODIN HAD BEFORE HE WAS THE ALL-FATHER?
HE, TOO, IS FORMED BY BELIEF. HE TOO WILL FACE DESTRUCTION THIS DAY.
STILL TRYING TO COVER UP YOUR BLEMISHES, FATHER?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I AM ODIN! HOW DARE YOU JUDGE ME? YOU DON'T KNOW ME AT ALL!
HIS NAME WAS DONNERSON.
DONNERSON.

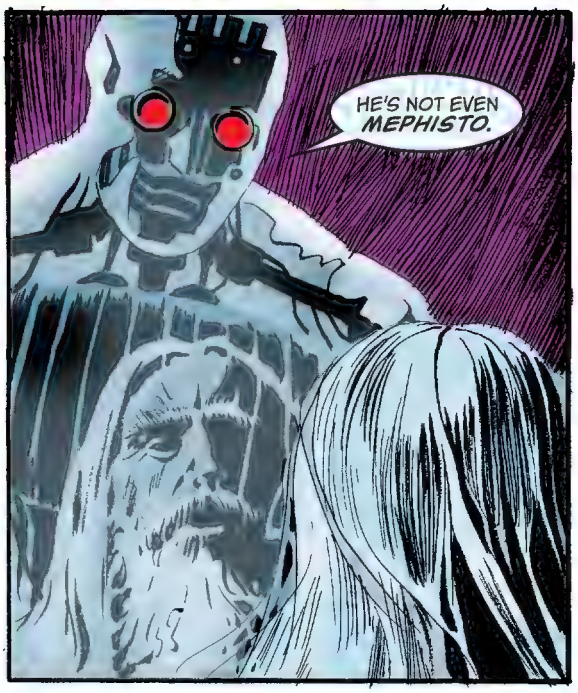

NO...
"DONNERSON STOOD THERE EXPOSED, NAKED BEFORE THE GODS OF HIS MAKING.
"AND HE WAS ASHAMED."
I--I'VE BEEN BEWITCHED! I DON'T KNOW WHO THIS IS YOU SPEAK OF!
LOKI? HOW DARE YOU...HOW DARE THOU--
OH, SHUT UP.
BEFORE YOU WERE ALL-SEEING, DONNERSON, YOU YOURSELF WERE WATCHED. YOUR ORIGINS WERE RECORDED. YOU WERE ONLY A MAN.
OR DIDN'T MEPHISTO TELL YOU ABOUT THE MOON...OR ABOUT THE WATCHERS THAT HAVE RECORDED ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY?

LET ME SHOW YOU HOW TO DO THIS, DONNERSON.
DEAD, AWAKEN! YOU WILL NEVER DIE AGAIN!
ANOTHER MYTH OF RAGNAROK MADE REAL.

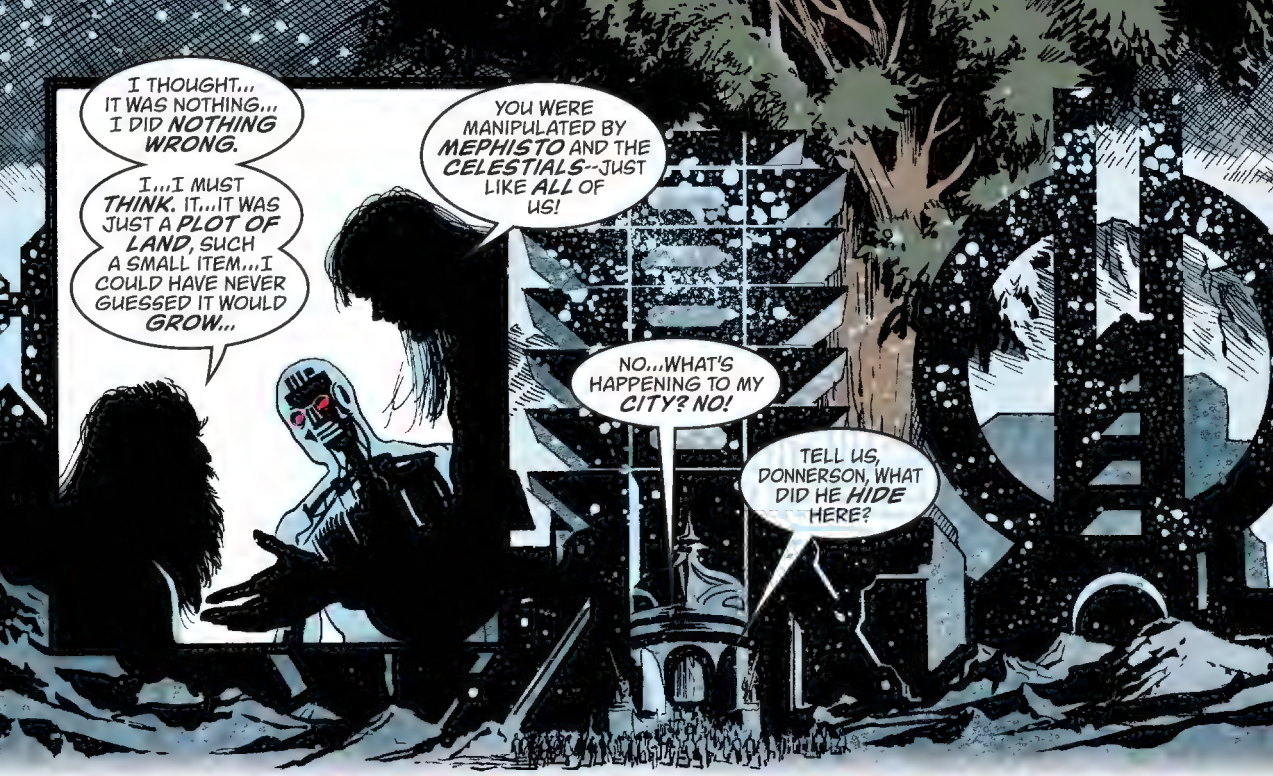
WHAT... WHAT DOTH TRANSPIRE?
I THINK YOU MEAN, "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?"

AARON, THERE WAS SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO ASK DONNERSON, NO?

YES... MEPHISTO HID SOMETHING IN YOUR REALM AND THEN HE LEFT YOU. YOU HAVE NO WORD OR PROMISE TO BE FAITHFUL TO.


HE'S NOT EVEN MEPHISTO.

YOU DIDN'T SELL YOUR SOUL...
...YOU TOSSED IT AWAY.
BELIEVING HIMSELF TO BE THE DEVIL IN THE SAME WAY YOUR BELIEF FORMED ALL OF THOSE OTHER ASGARDIANS, HE CAME UP WITH A PLAN TO ESCAPE THE JUDGMENT HE THOUGHT HE WOULD FACE AT THE END OF TIME.
AS A RESULT, HE CREATED A ROAD-BLOCK IN LINEAR TIME, A DETOUR BACK TO VARIOUS POINTS ALONG THAT TIMELINE.
HE CREATED THOUSANDS OF ALTERNATE TIME-INES...ALL OUT OF FEAR.
AND HE MANIPULATED THEM OUT OF HATE.
JUST AS HE MANIPULATED YOU.
WHAT DID HE HIDE HERE?

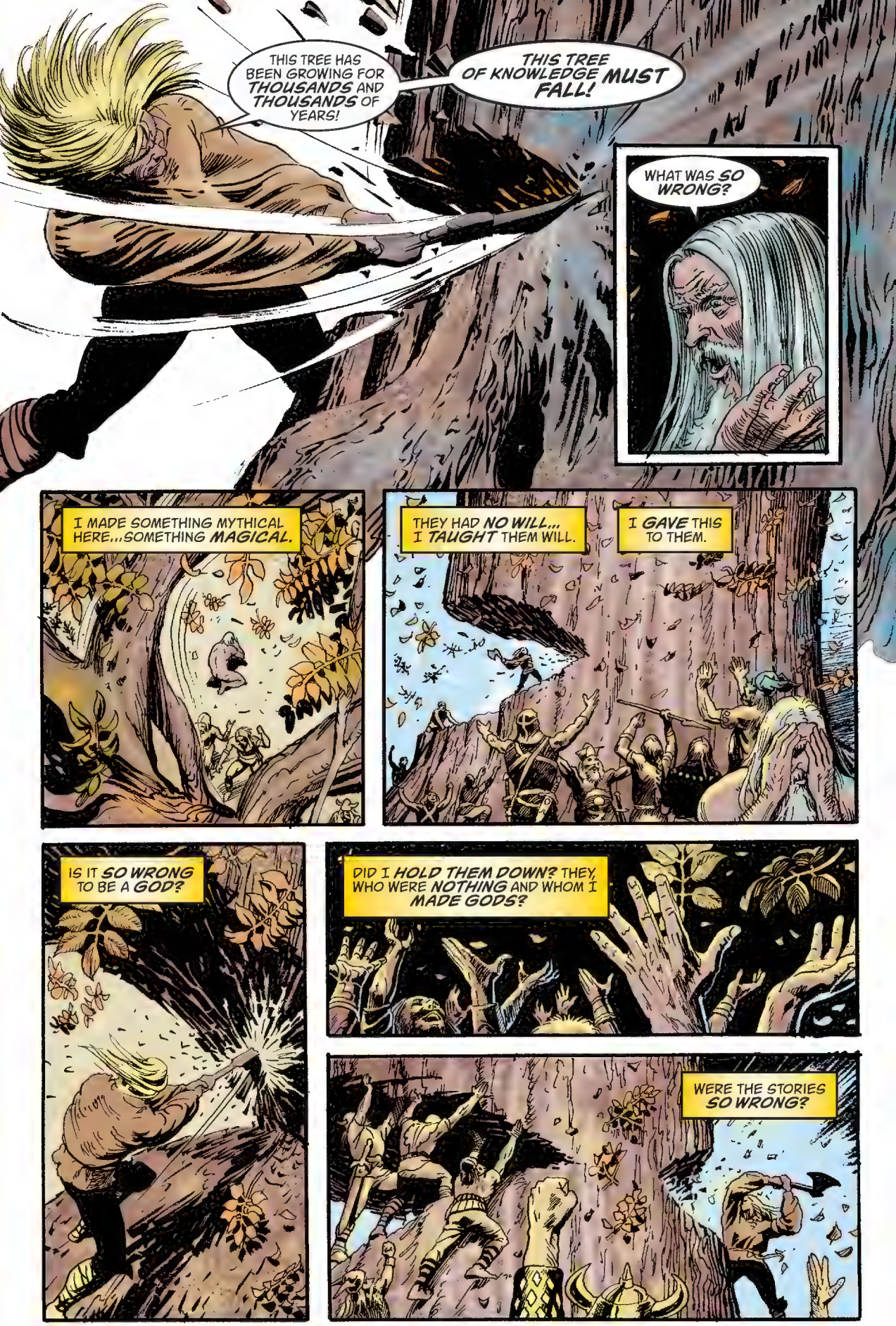

I THOUGHT... IT WAS NOTHING... I DID NOTHING WRONG.
I...I MUST THINK. IT...IT WAS JUST A PLOT OF LAND, SUCH A SMALL ITEM...I COULD HAVE NEVER GUESSED IT WOULD GROW...
YOU WERE MANIPULATED BY MEPHISTO AND THE CELESTIALS--JUST LIKE ALL OF US!
NO...WHAT'S HAPPENING TO MY CITY? NO!
TELL US, DONNERSON, WHAT DID HE HIDE HERE?

MEPHISTO'S SECRET WAS A...A MAP OF SORTS...OF ACCESS POINTS TO EACH OF THE ALTERNATE REALITIES.
THAT'S HOW HE WAS ABLE TO TRAVEL FROM ONE REALITY TO ANOTHER. HE KNOWS WHERE TO STEP BETWEEN THEM.

WHERE IS THE MAP, DONNER-SON?

LET ME SHOW YOU.

THE WORLD ASH.
IF YOU WERE TO TAKE A CROSS-SECTION OF ITS TRUNK, YOU WOULD FIND THAT EACH CIRCLE WITHIN THE TRUNK REPRESENTED A DIFFERENT TIMELINE.
THE TREE GREW WITH EACH NEW REALITY ADDED TO THE MULTI-VERSE.
THE FURTHER THE LINE IS FROM THE CENTER, THE SLOWER TIME MOVES IN THAT REALITY.
ON SOME WORLDS, YOUR EARTH-BOUND HEROES HAVEN'T AGED AT ALL.
TO YOU, YOU'VE HAD YOUR ABILITIES FOR THIRTY OR FORTY YEARS...TO THEM IT'S ONLY BEEN MONTHS.
IN HIS OWN WAY, MEPHISTO HAS GIVEN YOUR RACE IMMORTALITY.
BUT AN IMMORTALITY WE HAVE TO THANK MEPHISTO FOR ISN'T IMMORTALITY AT ALL. MORE LIKE ETERNAL DAMNATION, TO BE REDONE OVER AND OVER AGAIN...
...TO LOSE THE SCARS AND LESSONS LEARNED...ONLY TO BE YOUNG AGAIN...
...TO LOSE WHAT MAKES US WHO WE ARE ONLY TO EXPERIENCE OVER AND OVER AGAIN THE PAINS OF BIRTH AND YOUTH.
THOR, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I'M MAKING SURE MEPHISTO STAYS WHERE HE IS ON OUR EARTH.
AND I'M FREEING THE OTHER WORLDS FROM KNOWING WE EVEN EXIST. IT'S BETTER NOT TO KNOW.

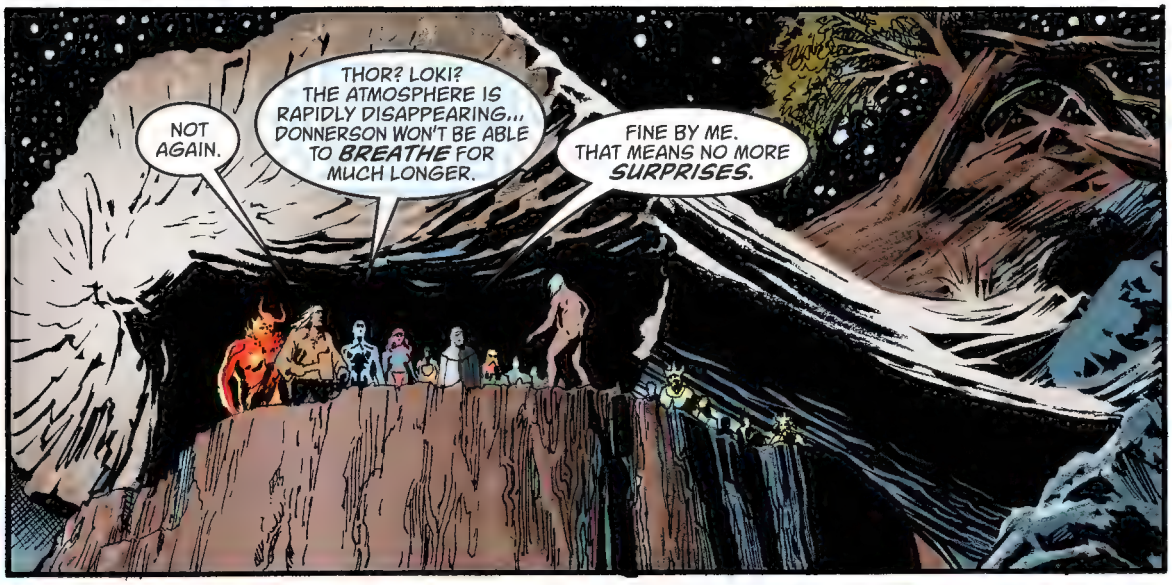

THIS TREE HAS BEEN GROWING FOR THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF YEARS!
THIS TREE OF KNOWLEDGE MUST FALL!
WHAT WAS SO WRONG?
I MADE SOMETHING MYTHICAL HERE...SOMETHING MAGICAL.
THEY HAD NO WILL... I TAUGHT THEM WILL.
I GAVE THIS TO THEM.
IS IT SO WRONG TO BE A GOD?
DID I HOLD THEM DOWN? THEY, WHO WERE NOTHING AND WHOM I MADE GODS?
WERE THE STORIES SO WRONG?

NO. THEY WERE NOT WRONG.
AND SOME GOOD WAS DONE...
...THEY WERE GOOD STORIES.

BEHOLD, MY CHILDREN...BEHOLD THE "DEAD EARTH" IN THE HEAVENS.
IT IS A BLIGHT OF EVIL THAT WE MUST ALWAYS TRY TO BALANCE WITH OUR LIGHT.
YOU MUST NEVER GO THERE, MY CHILDREN, LEST ITS GRAVITY CORRUPT YOU.
YES, FATHER. WE OBEY.
IT IS GOOD TO BE A GOD, FATHER. IT IS GOOD TO BE YOUR SONS.
YES, FATHER. THANK YOU FOR TEACHING US TO BE KIND.
AND IT IS GOOD TO BE YOUR FATHER...
...IT IS GOOD TO LIVE.

BY THE WAY, FATHER, OR IS MAKING IT WITH LA-J THIS EVENING!
BE QUIET, MI! I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF I'LL GET TO KISS LA-J, LET ALONE "MAKE IT."
THEN YOU'RE THE LIAR, OR!
YOU'RE STUPID, MI, YOU KNOW THAT?
THEY LOVE YOU SO MUCH, ALL-FATHER.
YES...IT IS GREAT TO SEE THEM LIKE THIS.
YOUR MOTHER ALWAYS SAID I MADE GOOD CHILDREN.

FATHER! WE FOUND THIS BEING IN THE GRAV-TRA FIELD!
I...I DON'T UNDERSTAND...
...WHAT'S HAPPENING?
IT DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ARMED, FATHER.
YET IT IS.
I HAD FORGOTTEN ABOUT THAT DAMNED RECORDER.
RECORDER?
I REMEMBER THOR'S WORDS...
..."ODIN HAD ALL THE RECORDERS DESTROYED YEARS AGO ONCE HE LEARNED WHAT THEY WERE RECORDING. YOU WILL BE NEEDED, X-51."
AND I KNOW WHAT I AM NEEDED FOR.
NOT...AGAINNN... NNNOT. NNNOT. NO.
NO!
OR?
NO, NOT OR...I AM THOR! I SAY NO, FATHER. NO...DONNER-SON.
HE DID IT AGAIN, THOR.
HE'S TRYING TO OUT-WILL YOU.
NOT AGAIN!

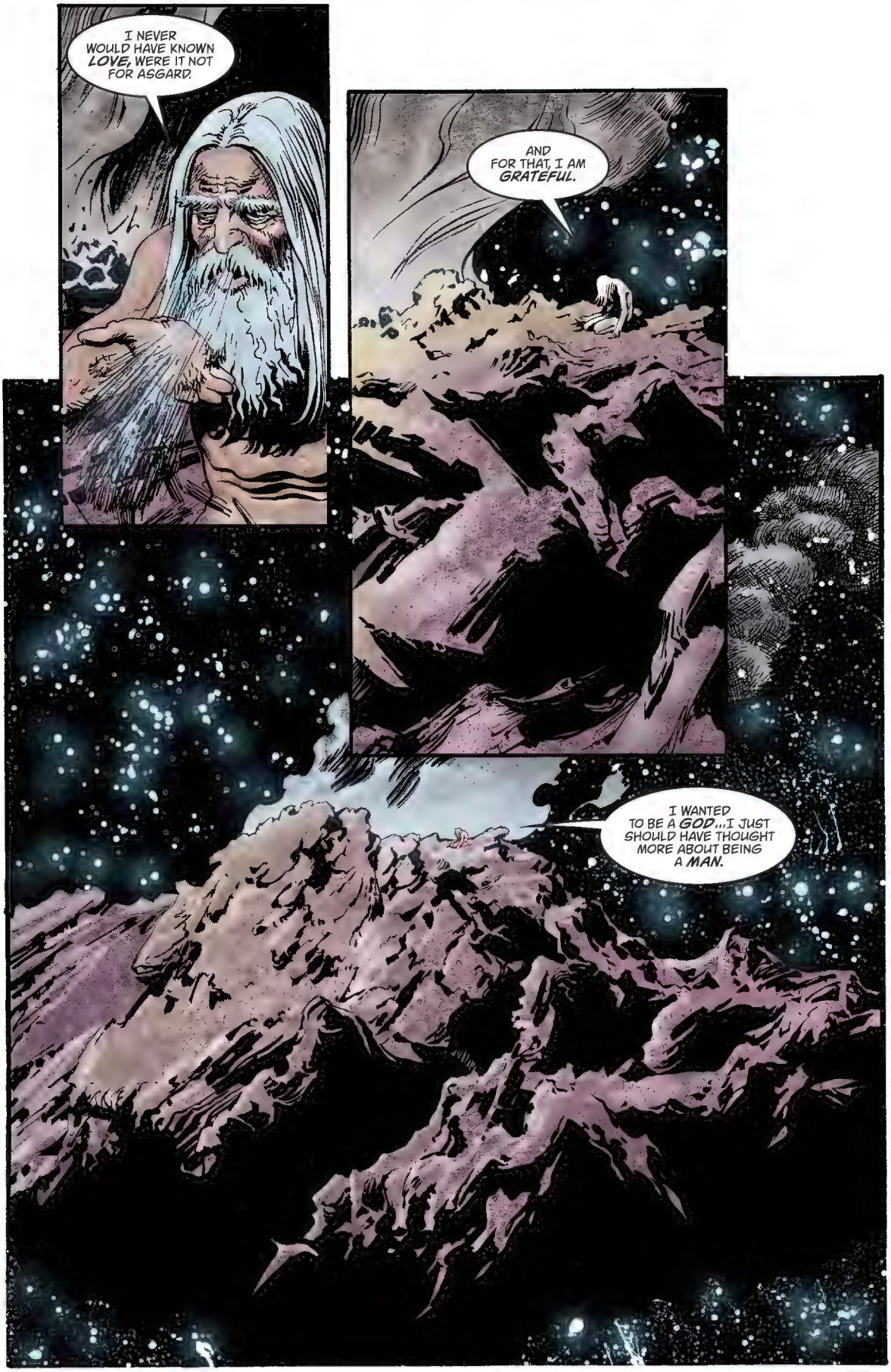

NOT AGAIN.
THOR? LOKI? THE ATMOSPHERE IS RAPIDLY DISAPPEARING... DONNERSON WON'T BE ABLE TO BREATHE FOR MUCH LONGER.
FINE BY ME. THAT MEANS NO MORE SURPRISES.

GODS.

NOT GODS, DONNERSON...BUT BEINGS THAT HOPEFULLY WON'T FORGET THE LESSON LEARNED HERE...
...AND RECLAIM THE ABILITY TO BE WHO THEY CHOOSE TO BE.

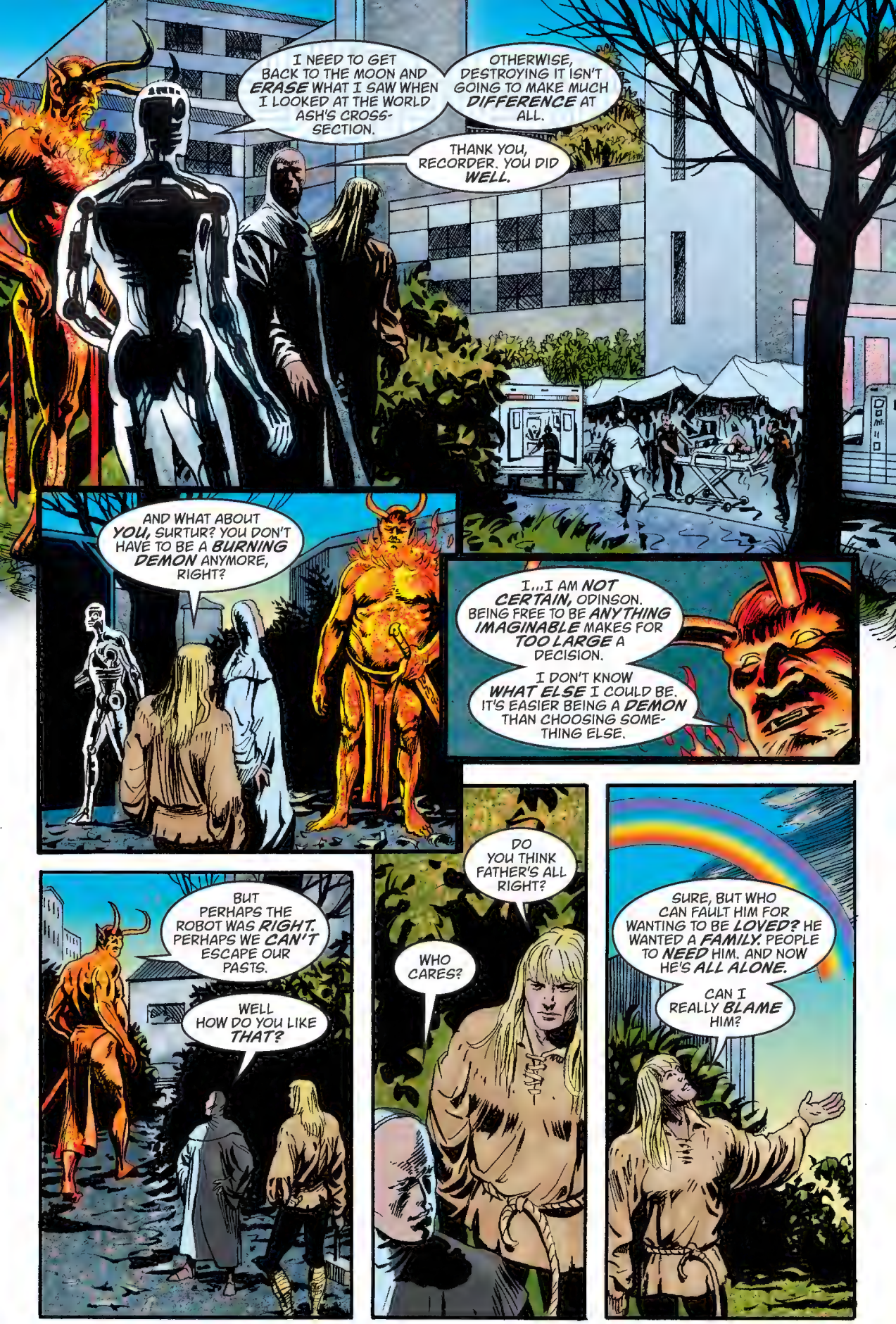
AS LONG AS THIS CROSS-SECTION EXISTS, THERE IS A MAP MEPHISTO COULD USE TO TRAVEL BETWEEN DIMENSIONS.
SURTUR?

WE SHOULD GO NOW, AND LET THE FLAMES BURN WHAT LITTLE OXYGEN DONNERSON HAS LEFT.
WE CAN'T RISK WHAT YOU KNOW WHEN THE SAME LEVEL OF MUTATION OVERTAKES HUMANITY, DONNERSON.
I CAN'T IMAGINE THE NEW DEATH MAKING ITS WAY HERE FOR QUITE SOME TIME.
CONSIDER THIS AN EXILE. WHILE YOU WON'T DIE FROM LACK OF OXYGEN, ANY WORDS YOU SPEAK HERE IN SPACE WILL NEVER BE HEARD.
I WANT YOU TO KNOW, DONNERSON, THAT PART OF WHAT YOU DID, I UNDERSTAND. SOMETIMES BEING SOMEONE ELSE IS EXACTLY WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS.
IT'S IRONIC, ISN'T IT?
THE CELESTIALS PLANTED A SEED AND FROM IT GREW A TREE...
I DIDN'T MEAN TO USE YOU...
...I JUST COULDN'T SEE.
I NEVER WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO HAVE A FAMILY OF MY OWN...I HAD BAD EYES...
...I WAS BORN WITH A TWISTED LEG.


I NEVER WOULD HAVE KNOWN LOVE, WERE IT NOT FOR ASGARD.
AND FOR THAT, I AM GRATEFUL.
I WANTED TO BE A GOD...I JUST SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT MORE ABOUT BEING A MAN.

I ONLY HAVE ENOUGH OXYGEN LEFT FOR A FEW MORE WORDS. AND THEY ARE THESE...
I'M SORRY.
ARE WE IN TIME?

FATHER ODIN! THANK THE FATES WE HAVE FOUND YOU! HELA SHOULD NOT DRINK OF THY NOBLE HERITAGE!
YOU...YOU CAME BACK? YOU WANT THIS...FOR YOURSELVES...AFTER ALL I'VE DONE?
IF ONLY THY SONS HAD LIVED TO SEE THIS DAY.
MY...MY SONS?
THEY PERISHED IN BATTLE WITH SURTUR, I'M AFRAID. WE MUST SING AND DRINK TO THEIR GLORIES!
WE WILL NEVER FEAR RAGNAROK AGAIN...BUT MIDGARD IS LOST TO US.
YOU ARE ALL MY CHILDREN.
INDEED, YOU ARE ALL GODS.


I NEED TO GET BACK TO THE MOON AND ERASE WHAT I SAW WHEN I LOOKED AT THE WORLD ASH'S CROSS-SECTION.
OTHERWISE, DESTROYING IT ISN'T GOING TO MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE AT ALL.
THANK YOU, RECORDER. YOU DID WELL.
AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, SURTUR? YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A BURNING DEMON ANYMORE, RIGHT?
I...I AM NOT CERTAIN, ODINSON. BEING FREE TO BE ANYTHING IMAGINABLE MAKES FOR TOO LARGE A DECISION.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE I COULD BE. IT'S EASIER BEING A DEMON THAN CHOOSING SOMETHING ELSE.
BUT PERHAPS THE ROBOT WAS RIGHT. PERHAPS WE CAN'T ESCAPE OUR PASTS.
WELL HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT?
DO YOU THINK FATHER'S ALL RIGHT?
WHO CARES?
SURE, BUT WHO CAN FAULT HIM FOR WANTING TO BE LOVED? HE WANTED A FAMILY. PEOPLE TO NEED HIM. AND NOW HE'S ALL ALONE.
CAN I REALLY BLAME HIM?

YOU'RE ACTUALLY FEELING SORRY FOR HIM, THOR?
OH WAIT, I FORGOT, YOU'RE THE GOOD, BLEEDING-HEART BROTHER, WHILE I'M THE EVIL...
I...
YOU'RE ONE OF THE GOOD GUYS, LOKI. REMEMBER THAT.
SO WHAT ABOUT YOU? WHY'D YOU PICK ONE OF THE HOSPITALS TO COME TO?
FOR A WHILE THERE, I WASN'T A GOD OF THUNDER AT ALL...ONLY A DOCTOR NAMED DONALD BLAKE.
THE WORLD IS PROBABLY IN NEED OF A GOOD DOCTOR MORE THAN A GOD OF THUNDER.
"BLAKE," HUH?
SOME PEOPLE JUST CAN'T LET GO OF THE PAST.
WHAT ABOUT YOU, LOKI? WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?
MEDIC
DON'T KNOW, BLAKE.
I CREATED THE AVENGERS ONCE...MAYBE I'LL DO IT AGAIN.

CHAPTER NINE

"What am I doing here, 'puter?"

"I'm trying to keep my promise, Luther Manning."

"I wasn't talking to you...you...oh, it's you, Aaron. I'm back on the moon, ain't I? You brought me back in the blink of an eye?"

"Yes."

"You've gotta give a guy some warnin' when ya yank him from one world to the next."

"Sorry."

"You said somethin' 'bout keepin' a promise?"

"I'm going to grow you a new body. You're going to be a man again."

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"Shut up, 'puter. It's nothing personal."

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you."

"I keep forgetting you have an internal hard drive."

"That's funny, a machine that can forget. I've been strapped to one for years. Your type never forgets."

"No. You're right, Luther, we can't forget. But that doesn't mean we don't want to. Being here is like a form of damnation, and I am only now beginning to understand that such judgments are self-imposed."

"LISTEN TO ME, LUTHER. YOU WERE A ***SOLDIER*** ONCE.

"YOU BELIEVED THAT AMERICA WAS THE PLACE WHERE ANYONE COULD BECOME ANYTHING IF THEY JUST ***WORKED*** AT IT HARD ENOUGH.

"BUT THIS NOTION IS NOT LIMITED TO A ***SINGLE*** PRINCIPALITY.

"IT'S THE NATURE OF MANKIND TO BECOME WHAT WE ***DESIRE,*** OR AT THE VERY LEAST, TO BECOME WHAT WE THINK WE ***DESERVE.***

"LOOK AT ***JOHNNY BLAZE.*** ORPHANED AT A YOUNG AGE, HE BECAME THE ADOPTED SON OF 'CRASH' SIMPSON AND HIS FAMILY OF DAREDEVILS.

"JOHNNY'S FATHER, WHILE HE LIVED, WAS A ***STUNT CYCLIST.***

"JOHNNY TRAINED TO FOLLOW HIS FATHER'S PATH, BUT WHEN HIS CYCLE ACCIDENTALLY CAUGHT ON FIRE, HE ALMOST KILLED HIS STEPSISTER, ***ROXANNE SIMPSON,*** WHO WOULD LATER BECOME THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE.

"THEN, THE ONLY WOMAN THAT JOHNNY EVER KNEW AS HIS MOTHER, HIS STEPMOTHER MONA, ***DIED*** THAT DAY...

"INTERESTING, ISN'T IT?"

"WHAT?"

"THAT JOHNNY BLAZE NEVER KNEW HIS ***REAL MOTHER***...A FRIEND OF MINE NAMED KYLE RICHMOND SAID THAT ***MEPHISTO*** MADE A SIMILAR CLAIM."

"WHAT DOES ***MEPHISTO*** HAVE TO DO WITH ALL THIS, AARON?"

"A FEW YEARS AFTER THE DEATH OF HIS STEPMOTHER, JOHNNY DISCOVERED THAT HIS ***STEPFATHER*** WAS DYING OF A RARE BLOOD DISEASE.

"THERE WAS ***NOTHING*** THE DOCTORS COULD DO..."

"THEN THEY DIDN'T KNOW THE ***RIGHT DOCTORS.*** LOOK AT ***ME.***"

"NONETHELESS, JOHNNY COULD NOT ACCEPT THE DEATH OF YET ***ANOTHER*** LOVED ONE.

"AND SO WHERE ***SCIENCE*** HAD FAILED, JOHNNY CALLED UPON THE DARK AND SPIRITUAL ***OCCULT FORCES.***

"MEPHISTO, WHO HAS ALWAYS HAD AN ***OPEN-DOOR POLICY*** FOR THOSE IN NEED OF A ***MIRACLE,*** HEARD JOHNNY'S CALL.

"IN EXCHANGE FOR BLAZE'S SERVICE, MEPHISTO GUARANTEED THAT 'CRASH' SIMPSON WOULD ***NOT DIE*** AS A RESULT OF HIS BLOOD DISEASE."

"SO SIMPSON ***LIVED?***"

"NO, LUTHER. HE DIED SHORTLY THEREAFTER IN ONE OF HIS ***STUNT SHOWS.*** BUT HE HADN'T DIED IN A HOSPITAL BED, JUST LIKE MEPHISTO HAD ***PROMISED.***

"SO MEPHISTO WENT AFTER BLAZE, READY TO ***CLAIM HIS SOUL.***

"JOHNNY'S CURSE WAS HALF-SPOKEN WHEN ROXANNE ***BLOCKED*** THE DEVIL'S DAMNATION OF BLAZE WITH A ***COUNTER-CURSE,*** BELIEVING SHE HAD ARRIVED IN TIME TO SAVE HIM.

"AND THE TRUTH IS, SHE ***DID*** SAVE HIM. MEPHISTO HAD ***NO POWER*** OVER HIM... *PER SE.*"

"WHAT'S THAT MEAN, AARON?"

"THAT ROXANNE WAS IN TIME TO SAVE JOHNNY FROM ***MEPHISTO***... BUT THAT DIDN'T MEAN SHE COULD SAVE BLAZE FROM ***HIMSELF.***"

"JOHNNY BLAZE'S ***MOTHER*** DIED SHORTLY AFTER HE WAS BORN. COMPLICATIONS FROM ***CHILDBIRTH.***

"HIS ***REAL FATHER*** DIED THE SAME WAY HIS ***ADOPTED FATHER*** DID. IN ***FLAMES.*** ON A ***BIKE.***

"AND THE ONLY MOTHER HE EVER KNEW, HIS STEP-MOTHER, ALSO DIED ON A FLAMING BIKE.

"JOHNNY BLAZE BLAMED ***HIMSELF*** FOR ALL OF THESE DEATHS...

"...AND UNKNOWINGLY ***TRIGGERED*** HIS OWN DORMANT ***CELESTIAL SEED*** WITH HIS FUMBLING DABBLINGS IN ***MAGIC.***

"HIS GUILT OVER EVERYONE HE CARED FOR DYING ON A BIKE OF FLAMES CAUSED A TRANSFORMATION HE BELIEVED WAS ***SUPER-NATURAL*** IN DESIGN, NOT BIOLOGICAL.

"THE ***GHOST RIDER*** WAS BORN, NOT BECAUSE MEPHISTO'S CURSE WAS INTERRUPTED, BUT BECAUSE JOHNNY BLAZE FELT ***GUILTY,*** AND BELIEVED HE SHOULD SPEND THE REST OF HIS EXISTENCE STRAPPED TO A ***BURNING BIKE.***

"I'M SORRY, LUTHER, I KNOW THIS IS ALL ***SO MUCH*** TO GRASP AT ONCE...

"...BUT YOU MUST KNOW THAT THERE IS A ***SEED*** IN EVERY MAN...A SEED THAT, ONCE GERMINATED, HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GIVE EACH MAN THE ABILITY TO ***BE ANYTHING*** AND ***BECOME ANYTHING.***

"BUT HUMANITY IS A ***FEARFUL*** RACE. A SMALL-MINDED COL-LECTION OF BEINGS THAT CAN SEE ***SO LITTLE*** SO MUCH OF THE TIME.

"LIKE JOHNNY BLAZE OR THE HELLSTROM CHILDREN, WE ARE MOLDED AND GIVEN FORM BY ***GUILT***...BY THE BELIEF THAT WE MUST BE ***DAMNED*** FOR THE POWER WE POSSESS.

"I ONCE BELIEVED THE MUTATION OF MANKIND WOULD LEAD US TO BECOME LIKE THE ***CELESTIALS.*** LIKE THE ***GODS*** THEMSELVES.

"BUT I WASN'T THINKING LIKE A ***MAN*** WHEN I HOPED FOR THAT.

"WHY DO WE HAVE A MUTATED MAN TAKE ON THE ROLE OF A ***DEVIL*** BUT NOT OF A ***GOD?***

"IT'S BECAUSE WE WANT SOMEONE TO ***DEAL*** WITH THE THINGS WE FEEL GUILTY OVER.

"NOT BECAUSE WE DON'T WANT TO BE ***SAVED*** FROM OUR GUILT... BUT BECAUSE WE ***CAN'T BELIEVE IT.***"

I NEVER DID ANYTHIN' TO DESERVE THIS.
BUT DIDN'T YOU, LUTHER?
I'VE SEEN EVERYTHING. YOU WERE A SOLDIER. AND WHEN YOU BECAME DEATHLOK, LIFE LOST ALL MEANING FOR YOU.
IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY, LUTHER... YOU WERE NEVER MUTATED, AS IT IS.
WHO IS THAT?
WHO WILL IT BE, LUTHER? THAT IS THE BETTER QUESTION. AND WE BOTH KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT.
SHUT UP.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE BEIN' ME... BEIN' MORE MACHINE THAN HUMAN...
YOU... YOU...
YES?
THIS IS GOING TO BE YOUR NEW BODY, LUTHER. YOU'RE GOING TO BE HUMAN AGAIN.

I AM CERTAIN THEY WERE GRATEFUL TO BE HUMAN AGAIN, JUDE...
...TO BE MORTAL AGAIN.

COME, MY FRIEND... THERE ARE MORE PEOPLE IN NEED OF YOUR HEALING TOUCH THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE.
I KNOW OF MANY THAT NEED HELP ON THE ISLAND OF ENGLAND.
KING BRITAIN HAS SUCH A DIFFICULT TASK, RULING SO MANY IN NEED.
I WOULD SO LIKE TO GIVE THEM THE GRACE I CAN OFFER, BUT AN ISLAND PROVES DIFFICULT.
WHY?
BECAUSE THIS PATH I HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO WALK IS ONE THAT I DO WALK. AND THAT MAKES REACHING ISLANDS DIFFICULT.
WALKING? YOU'RE SOMEWHAT ANTIQUATED, AREN'T YOU, JUDE?
IN HIS QUEST FOR POWER, THE MARVELL CHILD USED A TRANSPORTATION CLOAK.
AND HE HASN'T TOUCHED IT SINCE...IT'S STILL HERE IN THE CASTLE.
OF COURSE, YOU UNDERSTAND THAT ANY ATTEMPT TO SHARE YOUR GIFT OF ENTROPY WITH ME WILL LEAVE YOU LOST IN THE CLOAK--
--UNABLE TO SHARE IT WITH ANYONE ELSE.
AND NEITHER OF US WANTS THAT, DO WE?

I HATE THE NEGATIVE ZONE, STRETCH! I REALLY DO!

DON'T TALK LIKE THAT, BEN. WE'RE HERE TO SAVE IT.

ALONG WITH EVERYTHING ELSE.

HERE THEY COME...
HELLO, PETER.
CAROL.
BOB.
RICH.
IS THERE ANYONE HE DOESN'T KNOW ON A FIRST NAME BASIS?
DON'T BE IMPRESSED. I FIGGER HE'S STILL USIN' XAVIER'S PSYCHIC MIND.
WHERE IS IT? WHERE IS THE CANCER ANNIHILUS SPEAKS OF? WHERE IS THE PARADISE?
I'M SURPRISED AT YOU, MAR-VELL...DON'T YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN HANDIWORK?

IT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU.
OH, MY GOD.

AH, MERRY OLD ENGLAND... NOW DOESN'T THIS BEAT WALKING, JUDE?
LET'S HAVE FUN WITH A FEW GUARDS...
HAVE TO PUT MY FACE ON.
THERE.
I'LL LET YOU KNOW WHEN YOU'RE NEEDED.
WAIT, MEPHISTO.
WAIT? WHAT FOR?
WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME TO THIS ISLAND? WHY THIS PLACE?
I DON'T TRUST THAT YOU SEE ME AS A BLESSING TO HUMANITY...AREN'T YOU THE ONE WHO BRINGS CURSES?

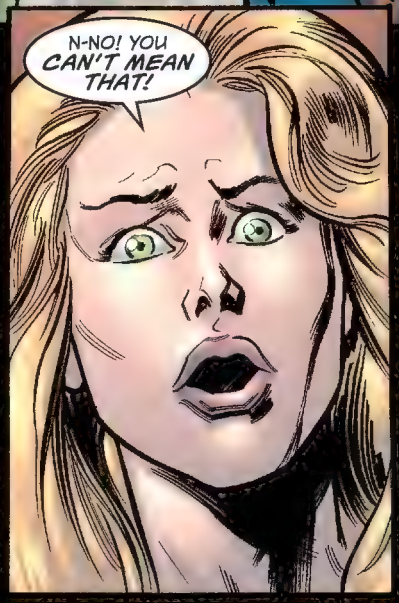
LISTEN TO ME, JUDE. THIS IS A PLACE OF HISTORY. IF YOU WANT YOUR MESSAGE OF PEACE TO GET AROUND, YOU START HERE.
YOU'VE BEEN SHUT OUT OF THE OMNIVERSE...HAVEN'T YOU, MEPHISTO?
YOU'VE BEEN TRAPPED HERE IN THIS REALITY. YOU'VE BEEN DAMNED TO THIS PLANE BY WHAT HAPPENED ON ASGARD.
AND YOU THINK KING BRITAIN AND THE THRONE OF ENGLAND IS A BACK DOOR TO THE OMNIVERSE.
THIS IS A FIGHT FOR THE SIEGE PERILOUS, ISN'T IT?
YOU...?
AND OF WHAT CONCERN IS THIS TO THE BLESSING YOU BRING TO INDIVIDUALS, JUDE...WHETHER HERE OR IN OTHER REALITIES?
NONE.

I'M SORRY, MEGGAN...I KNOW HOW MUCH THIS ENTIRE SITUATION HAS HURT YOU.

I FEEL TERRIBLE FOR YOU, BRIAN...BUT I'M BACK. AND WE CAN FINALLY MAKE THIS RIGHT.

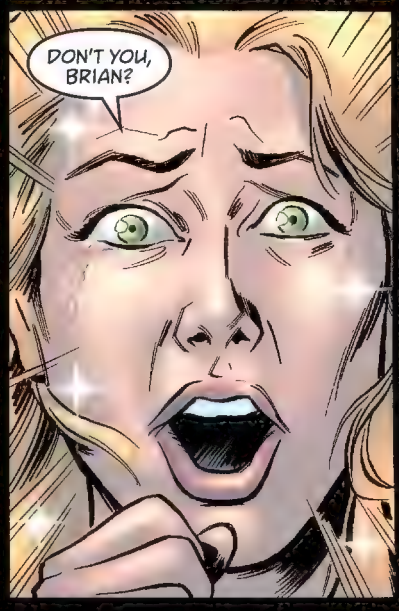
RIGHT, BRIAN? BRIAN?

BRIAN?
MEGGAN, I...I'VE DECIDED TO HONOR MY MARRIAGE TO MEDUSA.


N-NO! YOU CAN'T MEAN THAT!

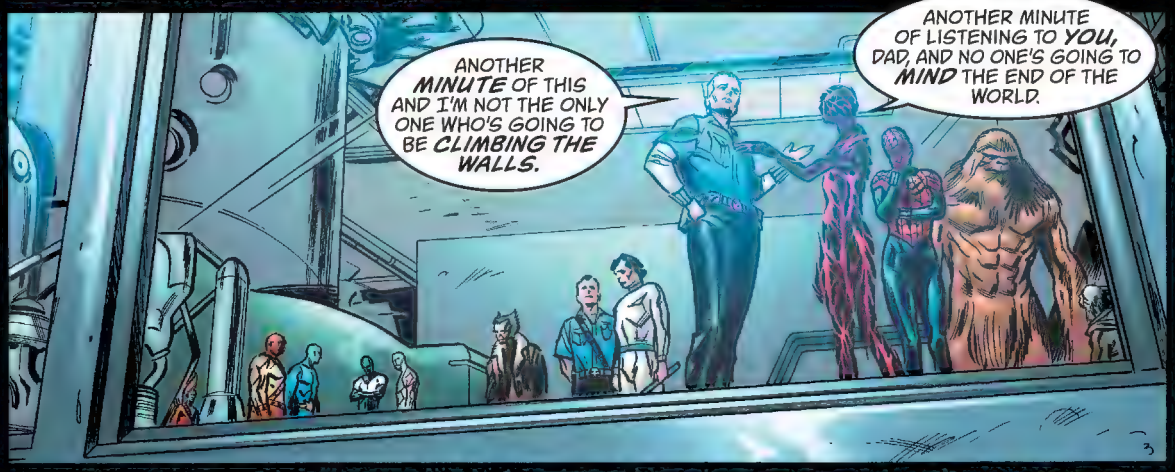
I...I... BUT YOU LOVE ME!

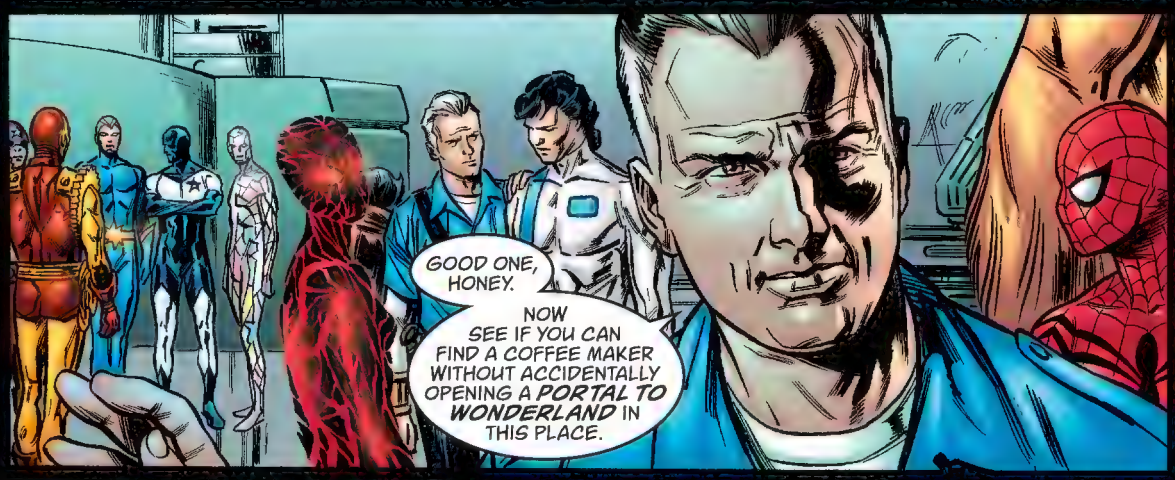
IF YOU HAVE TO HAVE MEDUSA TO LOOK GOOD FOR THE CAMERAS, FINE. BUT YOU LOVE ME.

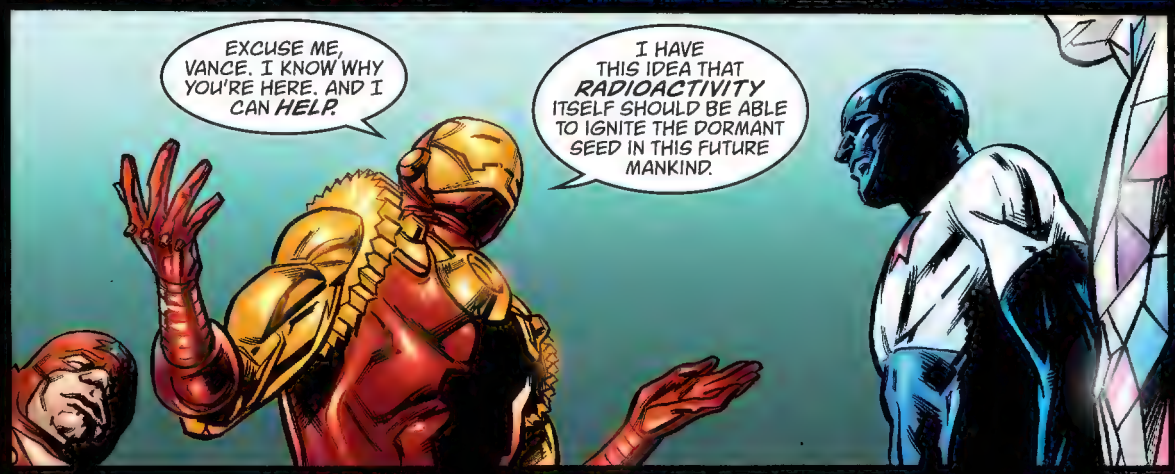

DON'T YOU, BRIAN?

I'M YOUR QUEEN. YOU CAN'T DO THIS...
MEGGAN...I... I CAN'T BE WHAT YOU WANT ME TO BE...THE WORLD NEEDS SOMETHING WE CAN'T OFFER IT...I AM SORRY...
BUT DOES SHE LOVE YOU, BRIAN?
"DOES SHE LOVE YOU, BRIAN?
"DOES SHE LOVE YOU, BRIAN?"

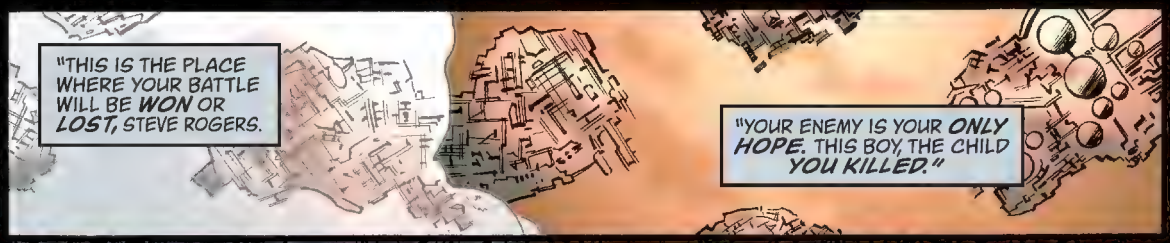
"THIS FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICER'S GOT BETTER THINGS TO DO THAN WAIT OUT THE END OF THE WORLD IN THE BAXTER BUILDING."


ANOTHER MINUTE OF THIS AND I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO'S GOING TO BE CLIMBING THE WALLS.
ANOTHER MINUTE OF LISTENING TO YOU, DAD, AND NO ONE'S GOING TO MIND THE END OF THE WORLD.

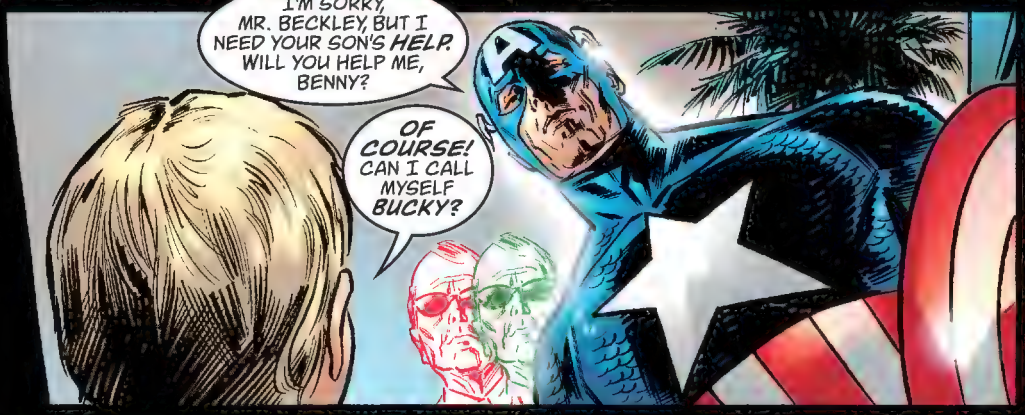

GOOD ONE, HONEY.
NOW SEE IF YOU CAN FIND A COFFEE MAKER WITHOUT ACCIDENTALLY OPENING A PORTAL TO WONDERLAND IN THIS PLACE.


EXCUSE ME, VANCE. I KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE. AND I CAN HELP.
I HAVE THIS IDEA THAT RADIOACTIVITY ITSELF SHOULD BE ABLE TO IGNITE THE DORMANT SEED IN THIS FUTURE MANKIND.

"I WAS...WITNESS TO A RADIOACTIVE EXPLOSION IN THE WORLD WHERE I COME FROM. THE RESULT LED TO MANY MUTATIONS.
"PERHAPS I CAN REPLICATE THAT EVENT IN YOUR REALITY."
YOU WISH TO COME WITH US? BUT WHY?
HAVE YOU EVER LIVED IN THE SHADOW OF SOMETHING SO BRIGHT THAT YOU COULDN'T GET OUT FROM UNDER IT?
TONY STARK?
"SOMETHING LIKE THAT."
YOU DETONATED AN ATOMIC BOMB IN THE MIDDLE OF A CITY! YOU KILLED MILLIONS, STARK!
AND MILLIONS MORE HAVE RADIATION POISONING! YOU HAVE TO PAY FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE!
LET'S JUST SAY I WANT A CHANCE TO MAKE A NAME FOR MYSELF.


"THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE YOUR BATTLE WILL BE WON OR LOST, STEVE ROGERS.
"YOUR ENEMY IS YOUR ONLY HOPE. THIS BOY, THE CHILD YOU KILLED."

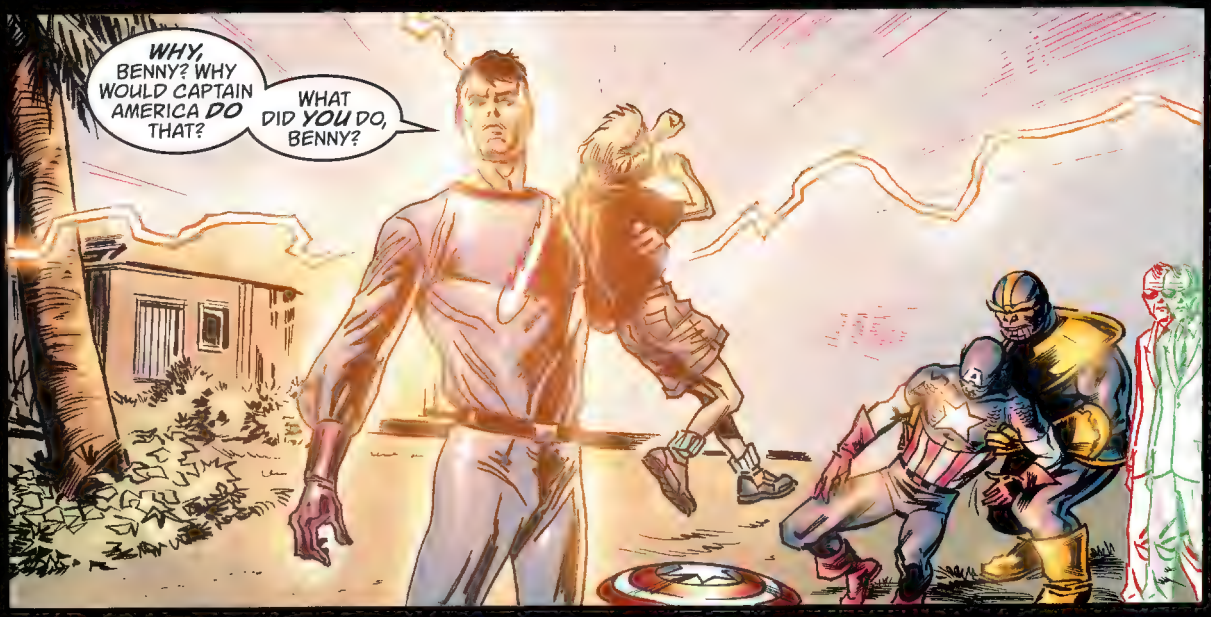
BENNY...
CAP!
I THOUGHT WE TALKED ABOUT THIS, CAPTAIN AMERICA.


I'M SORRY, MR. BECKLEY, BUT I NEED YOUR SON'S HELP. WILL YOU HELP ME, BENNY?
OF COURSE! CAN I CALL MYSELF BUCKY?

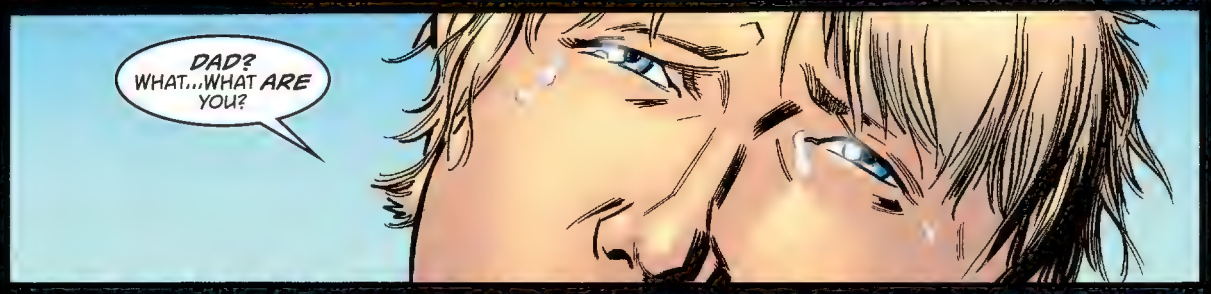
WHO ARE WE FIGHTING? ZEMO? THE RED SKULL? WHO?

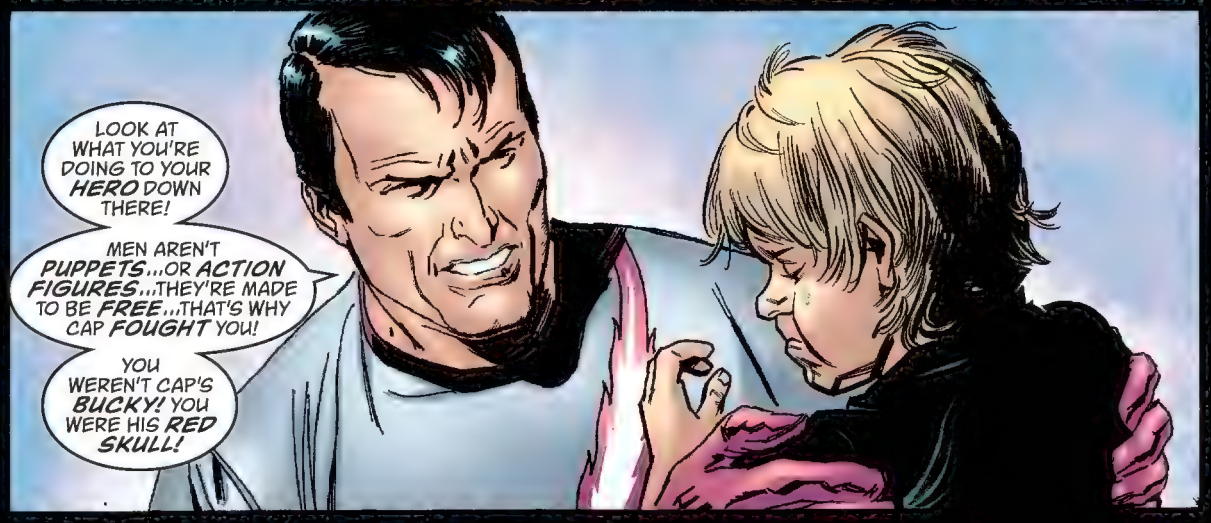
BEFORE WE DO ANYTHING, I NEED TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING, BENNY...
I DON'T GET IT, CAP... WHY ARE YOU SO SAD?
WHY ARE YOU--?!

YOU KILLED ME, YOU MONSTER!
NO, BENNY! DON'T!
HOW'S IT FEEL? HUH? HOW'S IT FEEL TO HAVE YOUR NECK BROKEN?
YOU CAN'T...KILL ME...
...I'M ALREADY...
SHUT UP.
NO, BENNY! YOU'RE MY SON! REMEMBER, CAP'S A HERO!
HE KILLED ME, DAD! HE HAS TO PAY!


WHY, BENNY? WHY WOULD CAPTAIN AMERICA DO THAT?
WHAT DID YOU DO, BENNY?

DID YOU HURT ANY-ONE?


DAD? WHAT...WHAT ARE YOU?


LOOK AT WHAT YOU'RE DOING TO YOUR HERO DOWN THERE!
MEN AREN'T PUPPETS...OR ACTION FIGURES...THEY'RE MADE TO BE FREE...THAT'S WHY CAP FOUGHT YOU!
YOU WEREN'T CAP'S BUCKY! YOU WERE HIS RED SKULL!

PUT ME DOWN, DAD.
NO, SON.
I'M NOT ASKING.
ONE MORE WORD OUT OF YOU, DAD, AND SO HELP ME, I'LL...
I LOVE YOU, BENNY.
THAT'S ONE, TWO, THREE... FOUR WORDS TOO MANY, DAD.

YOU'RE A MONSTER, BENNY. THAT WAS YOUR FATHER.
I ONLY DID WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE DONE, CAP.
I ONLY DID WHAT YOU DID TO ME.
"Evil comes from the abuse of free will."— C.S. Lewis

P A R A D I S E X

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER NINE

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

MEGGAN

"Meggan?"

"I don't want to talk to you."

"You don't even know who I am."

"It doesn't matter."

"Who we are always matters, Meggan."

"Not to me. It would be better if I was Medusa."

"No. You can only be who you are. You might be Meggan pretending to be Medusa, but inside of you, at your core, you are still Meggan."

"Whatever."

"Or whoever. Is that it?"

"I suppose. That witch stole him from me."

"No, Meggan. Brian Braddock never wanted this, never thought that he could ever have you back in his life. His marriage to the Queen of the Inhumans was an arranged marriage, for the good of all those on Earth."

"What about my good? What about his own? I'm tired of hearing what a great sacrifice Brian is making because he's going to stay married to Miss Hair."

"Why do you think all of history comes down to England, Meggan? Why do you think this small little island has become so significant? Not only to the Arthur and knights of old, but to ancient civilization as much as today?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. I want Brian."

"I have all the Watcher's equipment and all of history is available to me. Still I cannot see how it got here or the first time it appeared on this planet. It's a sword that not even the builder of Paradise desired in his arsenal. A sword that began an era of heroism hundreds and hundreds of years ago. A sword that once united a people, and hopefully will once more. To some it brought terrible fear, but for others it brought hope. Brian didn't choose the sword back when he first became Captain Britain, and perhaps down deep he knew what would

happen if he did, that he'd have to carry it. Regardless, he has chosen it now."

"Don't I get a choice?"

"Of course. You can choose how you are going to deal with this. How are you going to honor Brian in light of his choices and duties?"

"It doesn't feel like a choice."

"It never does. It feels like there is no choice at all. I'm not certain if you can hear such words from someone like me, from a synthetic artificial being who may or may not ever have any freedom of choice."

"What you are asking me to do is impossible. I love him."

"If it is impossible, then the Watcher and the Celestials and the Elders of the Universe are right about us."

"What? Who are you talking about?"

"It... doesn't matter all that much, Meggan. Not to what's going on with you and Brian. You know, Brian thought he used you."

"What?"

"He felt like the reason you were so beautiful was because of his influence and desires on your mutant shape-shifting ability. He looked at his relationship with you as one of taking advantage of your magic and grace."

"That's insane. I never felt like that. I always..."

"... had a choice?"

"Yes... I..."

"Brian feels as if he made the choice for you."

"But I love him."

"Brian felt like even that love was his manipulation, a sorry and unintended result of the maturity of your mutation. I'm sorry."

"This is so wrong. You're a bad robot."

"The truth is like a sword at times, Meggan. It cuts and hacks and seems to leave nothing left. The people of Earth have all been cut deeply since I became this planet's watchman. We are all waiting to see what we will become. What will become of us."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"It's not my choice. It's no one's but yours. Brian wants you, Meggan. He does. We can all see it. Medusa, too. Every part of him is crying out to hold you again. But somehow, he is denying that programming. Whatever it was that was born here so long ago, grows in the heart of King Britain. It's stronger than he is. And that fills me with great hope."

"Hope for what?"

"That we can be more than we are, more than the Celestials intended us to be. More than we've been. It matters who we are, Meggan. It matters that we have a choice."

"Not to me."

"I don't believe that, Meggan. You've been a hero yourself. Consider his role in this world, Meggan. About how important it is to the planet, to all the people here.

Can you do that? Think about it."

"No."

"Why not New York? New York was always the capital city of super humanity. Why has it transferred to England?"

"You tell me."

"Because the world is no longer about commerce. It's no longer a place of science. It's a place of magic and mystery. A number of people on this planet have discovered irrefutable evidence in regards to the origins of man and super humanity. They know the nature of reality and their place in the cosmos. And it isn't enough for them. They want more. And they are convinced that there is more. The sword suggests more. And Brian is the keeper of that sword and that hope. You need to consider what that means."

"I won't. I can't. I don't..."

"What would you do if you were King and everyone on Earth looked to you for leadership, Meggan. If everyone were afraid and you were supposed to offer them hope."

"Of course... Brian should be giving them hope... he gave me hope... he... Are you manipulating me?"

"The way Brian feels he did you? I don't know, Meggan. You tell me. We all have terrible choices to make. Choices that can bring awful guilt. Does your learning how important your choices are mean you are being manipulated? Does learning how to understand the world from someone else's perspective mean that evil has been done to you?"

"I..."

"Put yourself in King Britain's position, Meggan. Put yourself in his position. "

CHAPTER TEN

"What's happening, Aaron?"

"Being a watchman doesn't mean I understand everything I see, Luther Manning. Three realities are converging on each other. In the Realm of the Living, the reality you know, the new form of Death known as Jude has become allied with Mephisto, and the two approach England with the ambition to end the lives of everyone there."

"But won't the heroes be able to stop them?"

"The Iron Avengers have left Earth. And most of the greatest heroes have joined Reed Richards in the Negative Zone to confront the expanding Paradise."

"And in the Paradise?"

"Mar-Vell cannot be found and his Host of angels is doubting their author's sanity."

"Who are these 'angels'?"

"Transfigured heroes from the Realm of the Dead. Captain America. Phoenix. Doctor Doom. Tony Stark. Black Bolt. Hank Pym. Matt Murdock. They are now so opposed to Mar-Vell that Captain America is seeking further help in the Realm of the Dead."

"How can he do that?"

"He's trying to get help from a human capable of controlling the physical functions of the masses. This boy was best known to the world as The Skull."

"The kid? But isn't he—?"

"Yes. You're right. He's the child Captain America killed in the first place."

"MATT MURDOCK, THE ORIGINAL DAREDEVIL, IS THE MOST ABSENT OF THE ANGELS, SPENDING MORE TIME THAN EVER IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD...

"...ON THE STREETS OF HELL'S KITCHEN, NEW YORK. OR AT LEAST, WHAT APPEARS TO BE THE STREETS HE GREW UP ON.

"THE STREETS WHERE HE WAS BLINDED, AND HIS OTHER REMAINING SENSES WERE AMAZINGLY HEIGHTENED. THE STREETS WHERE HE MADE HIS OATH."

"OATH, X-51?"

"YES, LUTHER. EVEN BEFORE THE MURDER OF HIS FATHER, MATT HAD FORSWORN HIMSELF TO BECOMING A LAWYER.

"HIS FATHER MADE A DEAL WITH THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD TO PAY FOR MATT'S COLLEGE SO THAT MATT WOULD NOT BECOME A FIGHTER LIKE HIM...

"...A FIGHTER THAT WORKED 'PROTECTION' FOR THE MOB AND WAS PAID TO LOSE FIGHTS.

"BUT BATTLIN' JACK MURDOCK, MATT'S FATHER, NEVER SAW HOW MATT SPENT HIS NIGHTS. ALONE IN THE GYM, WORKING THE BAG, STUDYING TO FIGHT.

"IF HE HAD, HE MIGHT HAVE REALIZED THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS A FATHER CAN'T HELP BUT PASS ON TO HIS SON."

"YOU MEAN THE FIGHTING?"

"YES. BUT FAR MORE THAN THAT. HE PASSED HIS DECEIT ON TO HIS SON.

"BATTLIN' JACK MURDOCK WASN'T NECESSARILY A GOOD MAN, BUT HE PRETENDED TO BE ONE TO HIS SON.

"NOT A GOOD FATHER, BUT MATT NEVER KNEW IT. NOT A GOOD HUSBAND, WHICH IS WHY MATT'S MOTHER LEFT HOME BEFORE MATT HAD ANY RECOLLECTION OF HER...WHY SHE BECAME A NUN AND DENIED HER SON ANY KNOWLEDGE OF HER.

"SO MATT GREW TO BECOME A VIGILANTE, EVEN THOUGH THE LAW HE CHAMPIONED IN THE COURTS CONDEMNED THE ACTIONS OF THOSE WHO TOOK THE LAW INTO THEIR OWN HANDS.

"HE GAINED A LAW DEGREE WITH MONEY HIS FATHER MADE COMMITTING CRIMES.

"HE FOUGHT ON THE SIDE OF ANGELS DRESSED AS A DEVIL.

"HE PRETENDED--IN THE VERY COURT OF LAW HE WORKED SO HARD TO ENFORCE--THAT HIS HEIGHTENED SENSES DID NOT EXIST...

"...AND HE USED HIS APPARENT HANDICAP AS A WEDGE TO WIN THE PITY OF JURY AFTER JURY.

"IN THE END, HE ALLOWED THE WORLD TO THINK HE WAS DEAD, LONG BEFORE MATT HIMSELF ACTUALLY DIED."

"WHAT?"

"MATT WAS TRAINED BY A NINJA MASTER KNOWN AS STICK.

"STICK AND HIS FOLLOWERS FOUGHT A HOLY WAR AGAINST THE FORCES OF DARKNESS AND THOSE WHO BELIEVED THEY WERE SATAN'S VERY OWN HAND UPON EARTH.

"STICK TRAINED MURDOCK TO FIGHT IN THIS WAR.

"WHEN MATT MURDOCK WAS BLINDED AS A BOY, HE WAS STRUCK ACROSS THE EYES BY A CANISTER CONTAINING HAZARDOUS WASTES. THE WASTES, IT WAS BELIEVED, CAUSED MURDOCK'S HEIGHTENED ABILITIES.

"STICK REALIZED THAT ALL THE CANISTER'S CONTENTS DID FOR MURDOCK WAS TO ACCESS THE SENSES AND THEIR POTENTIAL THAT DAREDEVIL AND STICK THEMSELVES HAD FOUND THROUGH DISCIPLINE AND TRAINING.

"YOU SEE, THE HAZARDOUS WASTES DIDN'T GERMINATE THE CELESTIAL SEED WITHIN YOUNG MATT MURDOCK AS ONE MIGHT EXPECT. THEY SIMPLY ALLOWED MURDOCK TO ACCESS THE POTENTIAL OF THE UNGERMINATED SEED ITSELF.

"IN MURDOCK, THE SEED BECAME THE SOIL, THOUGH THE SEED ITSELF WAS NEVER GERMINATED.

"JUST LIKE ALL OF STICK'S FOLLOWERS.

"JUST LIKE ELEKTRA."

"ELEKTRA, WHO MATT HAD LOVED IN COLLEGE, WAS ALSO TRAINED BY STICK IN THE ***INVISIBLE ARTS.***

"HER EDUCATION WAS COMPLETED AS A MEMBER OF THE ***HAND,*** THE ASSASSIN GUILD I JUST MENTIONED.

"SHE WAS HIRED BY ***WILSON FISK,*** KNOWN TO THE UNDERWORLD AS THE ***KINGPIN,*** TO ASSASSINATE CERTAIN ENEMIES.

"ONE OF THESE ENEMIES TURNED OUT TO BE MATT MURDOCK'S LAW PARTNER, ***FOGGY NELSON."***

"WHICH ***REUNITED*** HER WITH MURDOCK?"

"YES, LUTHER.

"MURDOCK AWAKENED IN HER THE ***LOVE*** THEY ONCE SHARED. A LOVE SHE THOUGHT WAS ***LONG*** PUT TO REST.

"SHE COULDN'T KILL NELSON AS SHE HAD BEEN ORDERED...AND SO THE ***ASSASSIN*** BECAME THE ***TARGET.***

"***BULLSEYE,*** WHOSE HATRED FOR DAREDEVIL HAD GROWN TO ***INSANITY,*** WAS THEN HIRED TO KILL ELEKTRA. AND HE ALMOST SUCCEEDED."

"***ALMOST?*** BUT I THOUGHT SHE HAD ***DIED*** AND THEN WAS ***RESURRECTED?"***

"USING HER TRAINING, ELEKTRA THREW HER ***SOUL*** INTO A ***WITNESS*** OF HER DEATH--A DANCER WHO JUST HAPPENED TO HAVE SEEN HER STAGGER UP TO MURDOCK'S APARTMENT.

"AND SO, WHEN THE HAND ***RESSURRECTED*** ELEKTRA'S BODY LATER, IT WAS NOT THE SOUL OF ***ELEKTRA*** THAT LAY WITHIN, BUT THAT OF THE ***DANCER,*** A CLEAN SOUL ***UNTOUCHED*** BY THE HAND.

"ELEKTRA ***REVERSED*** THE EFFECTS OF THIS TRANSCENDENTAL MIGRATION ABOUT A YEAR AFTER HER BODILY RESURRECTION.

"ELEKTRA ***RETURNED*** TO MATT MURDOCK...AND IN TIME, THE TWO BECAME THE OBJECTS OF BULLSEYE'S MANIA ONCE AGAIN."

"BUT DIDN'T ELEKTRA ***KILL*** DAREDEVIL?

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEANT WHEN YOU SAID THAT MURDOCK LET THE WORLD GO ON ***THINKING*** THAT HE WAS DEAD WHEN HE ***STILL LIVED?"***

"HAVEN'T YOU ***GUESSED,*** MANNING? MURDOCK, USING THE SAME METHODS TAUGHT TO ELEKTRA, ***SWAPPED SOULS*** WITH BULLSEYE.

"HE LET ELEKTRA SEEMINGLY ***KILL*** DAREDEVIL SO THAT THEY COULD BE ***FREE*** OF EVERYONE. FREE OF THE ***CONTRADICTIONS*** THAT MARKED MATT MURDOCK ALL HIS ***LIFE.*** ELEKTRA LEFT NEW YORK SHORTLY AFTER THAT.

"BULLSEYE, OR THE ***BODY*** OF BULLSEYE, LEFT SHORTLY THEREAFTER TO BE ***REUNITED*** WITH ELEKTRA IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

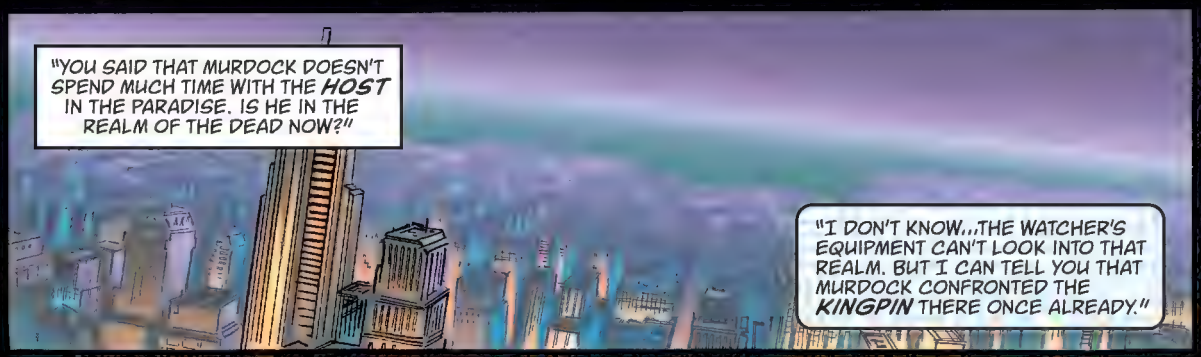
"FOGGY NELSON ***POURED OVER*** DOSSIER AFTER DOSSIER IN MURDOCK'S FILES, PROVIDING HIM WITH ***EVIDENCE*** HE WOULD LATER USE TO SEND THE KINGPIN TO ***PRISON.***

"FOGGY DELIVERED THE INFORMATION TO CITY HALL IN A WAY THAT LED TO RUMORS THAT ***NELSON HIMSELF*** WAS THE MASKED VIGILANTE."

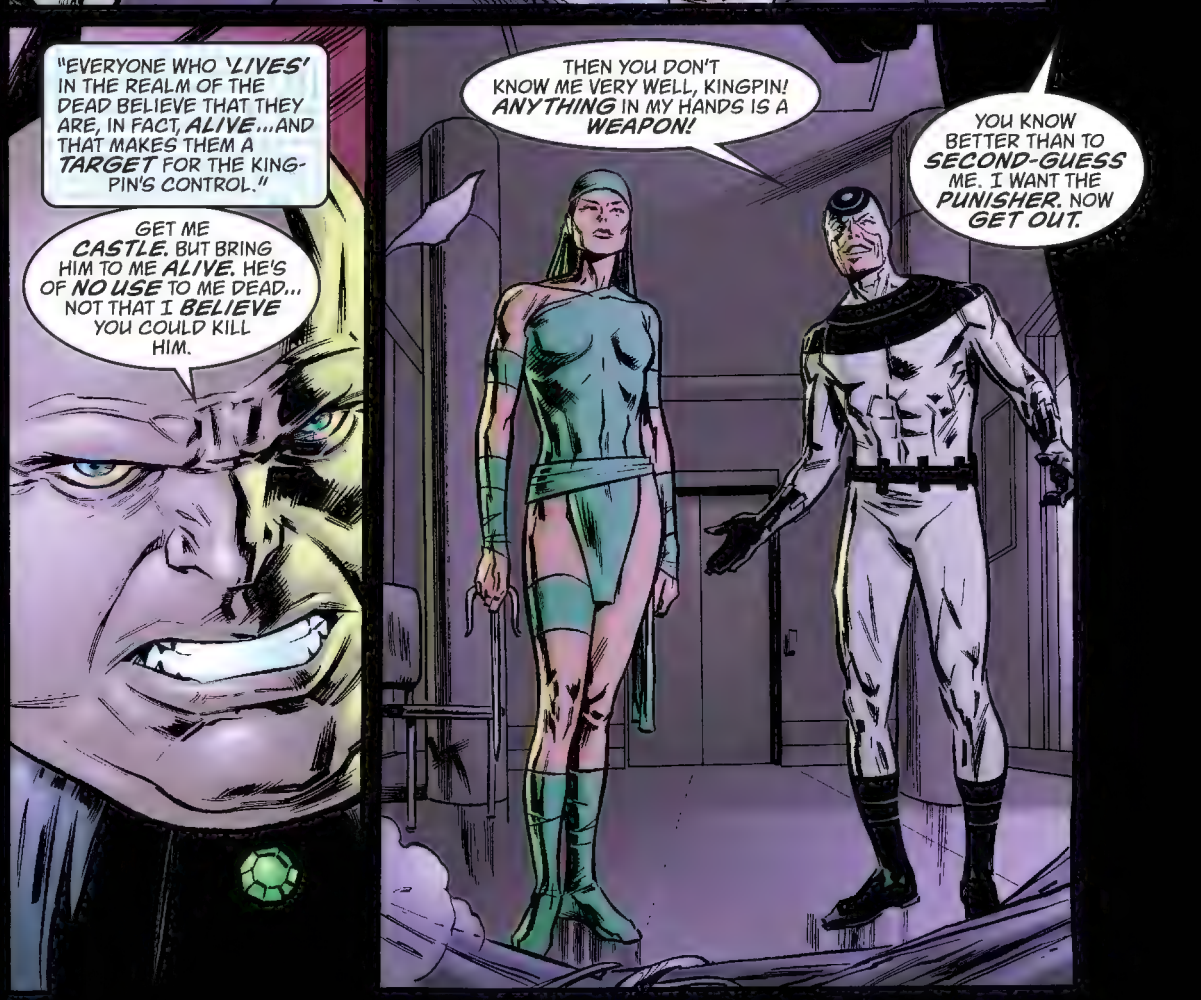
"BUT IN ***BULLSEYE'S BODY?*** MURDOCK WAS IN THE BODY OF THE MAN THAT KILLED... THAT ***TRIED*** TO KILL HER?"

"YOU COULD CONSOLE YOURSELF WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT LIKE JUSTICE, ***LOVE*** IS ALSO BLIND, MANNING.

"OR YOU COULD THINK OF IT AS YET ANOTHER OXYMORON TO DEFINE MURDOCK AND THE LIFE--AND DEATH--OF ***DAREDEVIL."***

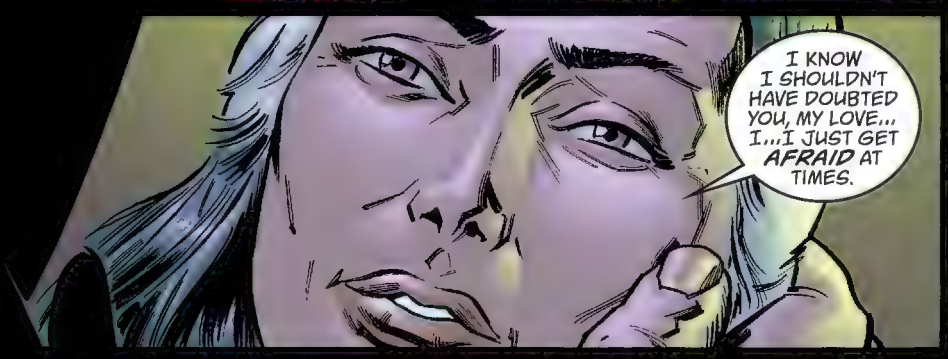

"YOU SAID THAT MURDOCK DOESN'T SPEND MUCH TIME WITH THE HOST IN THE PARADISE. IS HE IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD NOW?"
"I DON'T KNOW...THE WATCHER'S EQUIPMENT CAN'T LOOK INTO THAT REALM. BUT I CAN TELL YOU THAT MURDOCK CONFRONTED THE KINGPIN THERE ONCE ALREADY."

AS IF MURDOCK WEREN'T HIS USUAL PAIN-IN-THE-ASS SELF, NOW I HAVE CASTLE TO CONTEND WITH! HE'S TRYING TO KILL EVERYONE!
"WHY WOULD MURDOCK EVEN GO TO THE REALM OF THE DEAD?"
"THE KINGPIN HAD BEEN TAKEN TO THE PARADISE, BUT RATHER THAN ACCEPT LIVING IN A HEAVEN OF HIS OWN MAKING, ONE PEOPLED BY HIS OWN IMAGINATION, WILSON FISK CHOSE INSTEAD TO MANIPULATE THOSE IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD.


"EVERYONE WHO 'LIVES' IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE, IN FACT, ALIVE...AND THAT MAKES THEM A TARGET FOR THE KINGPIN'S CONTROL."
GET ME CASTLE. BUT BRING HIM TO ME ALIVE. HE'S OF NO USE TO ME DEAD... NOT THAT I BELIEVE YOU COULD KILL HIM.
THEN YOU DON'T KNOW ME VERY WELL, KINGPIN! ANYTHING IN MY HANDS IS A WEAPON!
YOU KNOW BETTER THAN TO SECOND-GUESS ME. I WANT THE PUNISHER. NOW GET OUT.

WILSON?
VANESSA, MY LOVE...
I AM CONCERNED WITH HOW OFTEN YOUR DOOR IS CLOSED OF LATE. IT REMINDS ME OF THE OLD DAYS.
YOU MADE ME A PROMISE, WILSON. NO MORE VIOLENCE. NO MORE CRUELTY.

YOU ARE MY SURE AND CERTAIN COMPASS, MY DEAR. THOSE DAYS ARE LONG GONE. JUST AS THE MAN WHO LIVED IN THOSE DAYS IS.

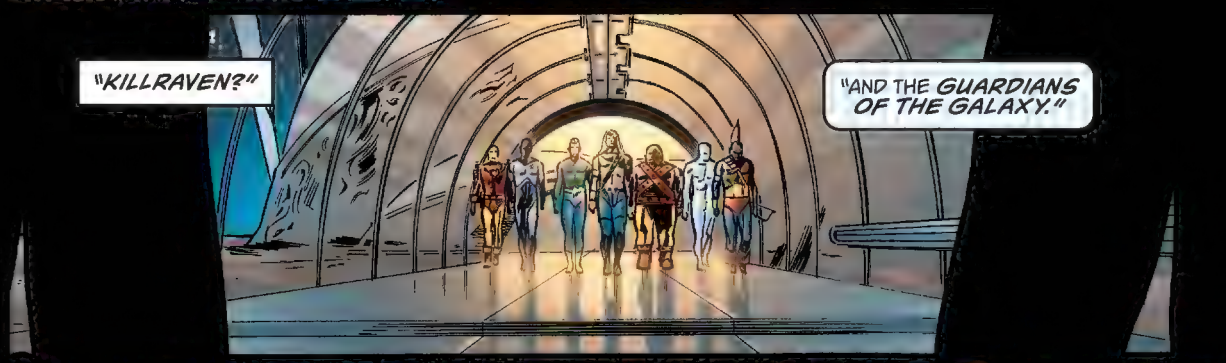

I KNOW I SHOULDN'T HAVE DOUBTED YOU, MY LOVE... I...I JUST GET AFRAID AT TIMES.

I KNOW...AND I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE AFRAID. BUT THAT'S PART OF WHAT MAKES YOU DEAR TO ME.
YOUR CONCERN FOR ME, FOR OUR CITY... IT MAKES ME WORK DAY AND NIGHT TO BRING CONTROL TO THE BOROUGHS. I SHARE YOUR FEAR.
I SUPPOSE THE GREATEST CONCERN WOULD BE IF I WERE A MAN WITHOUT FEAR.

"YOU CAN'T LOOK INTO THE THIRD REALM, EITHER--CAN YOU, X-51? YOU CAN'T SEE THIS PARADISE YOU KEEP SPEAKING OF."
"NO. BUT I CAN TELL YOU, MANNING, THAT REED RICHARDS AND HIS ARMADA ARE APPROACHING THE PARADISE FROM THE NEGATIVE ZONE. REED WANTS TO SPEAK TO MAR-VELL."
I NEVER GET USED TA THIS PLACE! 'SPECIALLY THE SMELL!
I KNOW YOU'RE WATCHING ME, ROBOT. I WANT WHAT YOU PROMISED ME.
"YES...I AM WATCHING YOU, HYPERION. AND I BELIEVE THE FULFILLMENT OF WHAT I OFFERED YOU AFTER HELPING ME TO SAVE THE ALTERNATE REALITIES IS AT HAND."
THE INHABITANTS OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE AREN'T EVEN TRYING TO FIGHT US!
THEY EITHER EXPECT US TO DIE OR BE CONSUMED BY THE PARADISE!
THEY ARE FLEEING TO THE FAR EDGES OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE... I THINK THEY ARE NOW CONVINCED THAT THIS IS TOO BIG TO SPEND TIME FINDING SOMEONE TO BLAME.

THE TETHER ROPE IS READY, REED. ARE YOU?
I THINK SO, MAR-VELL.
REED?
YOU'RE LEAVING ME AGAIN. YOU BROUGHT ME ALONG SO THAT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT JUDE TOUCHING ME.
YOU DID THIS FOR ME, DIDN'T YOU? YOU BROUGHT ME HERE TO SAVE ME FROM JUDE.
YOU'RE GOING TO DIE AND LEAVE ME HERE TO LIVE ALONE?
HUSH, SUE, DARLING... I'M NOT GOING TO DIE...
...I DON'T KNOW HOW.

"WE HAVE VISITORS, MANNING... VISITORS WHO NEVER GOT THE CHANCE TO MEET REED IN LATVERIA."


"KILLRAVEN?"
"AND THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY."

HEY, BUDDY.
HOW ARE YOU, LUTHER?
DID YOU GET WHAT YOU WANTED, VANCE ASTRO?
YES.
ARNO STARK IS GOING TO HELP US USE RADIATION TO GERMINATE THE MUTAGENIC SEEDS WITHIN MANKIND...
...AND EMPOWER HUMANITY AGAINST THE ALIEN INVASION IN THEIR FUTURE.

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD APOLOGIZE FOR THE WAY I TREATED YOU WHEN WE FIRST ARRIVED...
...BUT THAT'S JUST NOT MY WAY.

SO I SEE THAT YOU'VE GOTTEN YOUR WISH TO ESCAPE YOUR PAST, ARNO. TO ESCAPE THE MUTATIONS YOU CREATED IN YOUR ERA.

AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, KILL-RAVEN? HAVE YOU FOUND WHAT YOU WANTED TO KNOW?

I THINK SO... IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER THE GUARDIANS ARE FROM MY FUTURE OR NOT. AS LONG AS I KNOW THAT THERE IS ONE REALITY WHERE HUMANITY DID WIN.
I HOPE YOU ENJOY YOUR NEW BODY, LUTHER.
BYE.
THANKS, ROBOT. IF YOU'RE STILL AROUND IN A FEW THOUSAND YEARS, GIVE US A VISIT.

YOU DON'T REALLY THINK I'M DEAD, DO YOU?
WHO SAID THAT?
WHO SAID THAT?!
I DID. YOUR FATHER DID.
BUT I KILLED YOU!
NO, BENNY. YOU JUST REMINDED ME THAT I WAS ALREADY DEAD.
THAT YOU WERE ALREADY DEAD. AND I COULDN'T SAVE YOU...OR THE WORLD FROM YOU.
YOU WERE BAD-- WEREN'T YOU, BENNY?
THAT'S WHY CAPTAIN AMERICA DID WHAT HE DID.
YOU USED YOUR POWERS TO HURT PEOPLE. AND A HERO HAD TO STOP YOU.

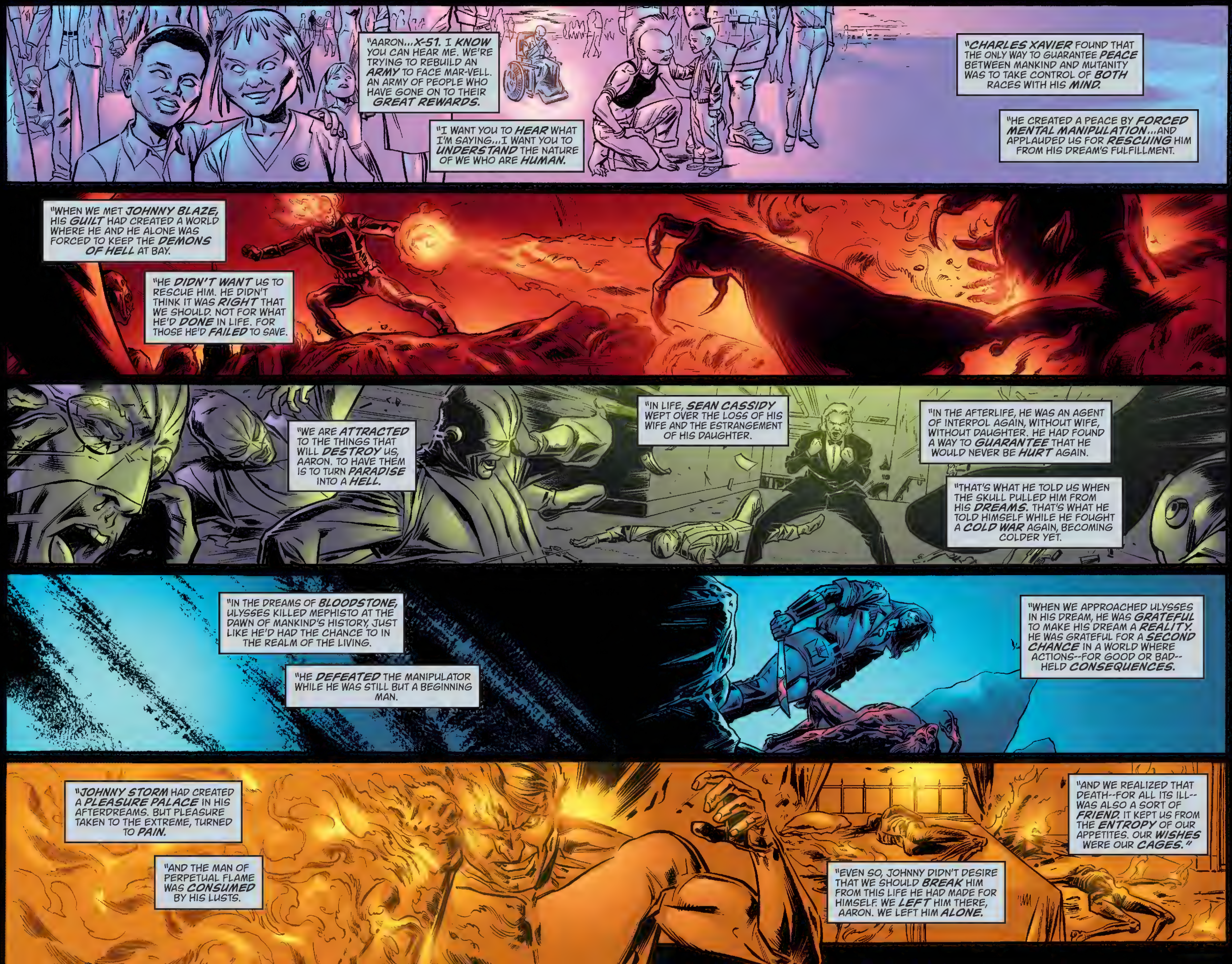
DIDN'T YOU, BENNY?
I... YES.
AND NOW CAPTAIN AMERICA--YOUR HERO--NEEDS YOUR HELP.
I WAS A SUPER HERO ONCE TOO, BENNY.
ARE YOU GOING TO HELP US?

"DO NOT FEAR, KING BRITAIN...YOUR THRONE IS SAFE. THIS IS AN ISLAND, AND TO MY UNDERSTANDING THIS NEW 'DEATH' CANNOT SWIM."
SO WE'RE SAFE WHILE DEATH SPREADS ACROSS THE REST OF THE WORLD? IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING?
IS OUR SAFETY REALLY ALL YOU THINK I CARE ABOUT?
WE MUST OPEN THE DOORS TO ALL THOSE WHO NEED REFUGE! THEY WILL BE SAFE HERE BECAUSE THIS SWORD IS THE SWORD OF DEATH!
PERHAPS THAT IS THE REASON MARVELL DIDN'T TAKE IT WHEN I OFFERED IT TO HIM.
KING BRIAN--WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!
SHOW ME, JACK! GARGOYLE, BRING MY SWORD!

WHAT... WHAT ARE THEY?
I THINK THEY'RE DEVIANTS-- AN EARLY EVOLUTIONARY STRAIN OF HUMANITY. BUT WHY ARE THEY HERE? WHY NOW?
"DO WHAT YOU CAN, JACK. I NEED MY SWORD AND STEED."

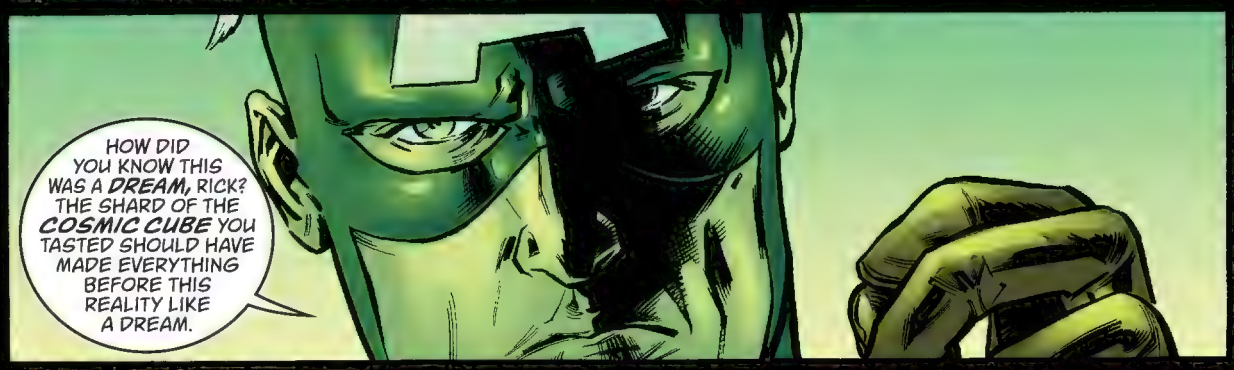
WHERE ARE YOU, GARGOYLE...?
WHERE IS EXCALIBUR?
HERE IT IS, KING BRITAIN!
I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU THAT THIS WON'T KILL YOU, BUT WE BOTH KNOW THAT TO BE WRONG! IT IS THE SWORD OF DEATH, AFTER ALL!
AND THE ONLY WAY TO CONTROL JUDE.

COOL.
WELCOME TO PARADISE, BENNY.
PARADISE IS WHAT WE MAKE OF IT, CAPTAIN.
I PRAY YOU'RE WRONG, ALIEN. I HOPE THIS ISN'T PARADISE...I DON'T WANT TO BE THE AUTHOR OF MY OWN DESTINY.
THE PLATE IS RIGHT WHERE DOOM SAID IT WOULD BE.
DOOM? AND YOU TRUST HIM?
HE'S NOT THE MAN HE ONCE WAS, THANOS. NONE OF US ARE.
WE MUST EAT TO ENTER THEIR AFTER-STATES.
I'M GOING TO ANCHOR US, SO WE DON'T GET SWEPT INTO ANY PARTICULAR VISION BY ALLOWING X-51 TO HEAR OUR THOUGHTS.
HOW DO WE KNOW YOU'RE NOT JUST SENDING A MESSAGE TO MAR-VELL? YOU DO SHARE HIS CONSCIOUSNESS, DON'T YOU?
NOT EXACTLY. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE MAR-VELL IS RIGHT NOW. AND I'M SUPPOSED TO KNOW EVERY-THING.
DON'T WORRY, I WON'T BETRAY YOU. I HAVE NO REASON TO.


"AARON...X-51. I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME. WE'RE TRYING TO REBUILD AN ARMY TO FACE MAR-VELL. AN ARMY OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE GONE ON TO THEIR GREAT REWARDS.
"I WANT YOU TO HEAR WHAT I'M SAYING...I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF WE WHO ARE HUMAN.
"CHARLES XAVIER FOUND THAT THE ONLY WAY TO GUARANTEE PEACE BETWEEN MANKIND AND MUTANITY WAS TO TAKE CONTROL OF BOTH RACES WITH HIS MIND.
"HE CREATED A PEACE BY FORCED MENTAL MANIPULATION...AND APPLAUDED US FOR RESCUING HIM FROM HIS DREAM'S FULFILLMENT.
"WHEN WE MET JOHNNY BLAZE, HIS GUILT HAD CREATED A WORLD WHERE HE AND HE ALONE WAS FORCED TO KEEP THE DEMONS OF HELL AT BAY.
"HE DIDN'T WANT US TO RESCUE HIM. HE DIDN'T THINK IT WAS RIGHT THAT WE SHOULD. NOT FOR WHAT HE'D DONE IN LIFE. FOR THOSE HE'D FAILED TO SAVE.
"WE ARE ATTRACTED TO THE THINGS THAT WILL DESTROY US, AARON. TO HAVE THEM IS TO TURN PARADISE INTO A HELL.
"IN LIFE, SEAN CASSIDY WEPT OVER THE LOSS OF HIS WIFE AND THE ESTRANGEMENT OF HIS DAUGHTER.
"IN THE AFTERLIFE, HE WAS AN AGENT OF INTERPOL AGAIN, WITHOUT WIFE, WITHOUT DAUGHTER. HE HAD FOUND A WAY TO GUARANTEE THAT HE WOULD NEVER BE HURT AGAIN.
"THAT'S WHAT HE TOLD US WHEN THE SKULL PULLED HIM FROM HIS DREAMS. THAT'S WHAT HE TOLD HIMSELF WHILE HE FOUGHT A COLD WAR AGAIN, BECOMING COLDER YET.
"IN THE DREAMS OF BLOODSTONE, ULYSSES KILLED MEPHISTO AT THE DAWN OF MANKIND'S HISTORY, JUST LIKE HE'D HAD THE CHANCE TO IN THE REALM OF THE LIVING.
"HE DEFEATED THE MANIPULATOR WHILE HE WAS STILL BUT A BEGINNING MAN.
"WHEN WE APPROACHED ULYSSES IN HIS DREAM, HE WAS GRATEFUL TO MAKE HIS DREAM A REALITY. HE WAS GRATEFUL FOR A SECOND CHANCE IN A WORLD WHERE ACTIONS--FOR GOOD OR BAD--HELD CONSEQUENCES.
"JOHNNY STORM HAD CREATED A PLEASURE PALACE IN HIS AFTERDREAMS. BUT PLEASURE TAKEN TO THE EXTREME, TURNED TO PAIN.
"AND THE MAN OF PERPETUAL FLAME WAS CONSUMED BY HIS LUSTS.
"EVEN SO, JOHNNY DIDN'T DESIRE THAT WE SHOULD BREAK HIM FROM THIS LIFE HE HAD MADE FOR HIMSELF. WE LEFT HIM THERE, AARON. WE LEFT HIM ALONE.
"AND WE REALIZED THAT DEATH--FOR ALL ITS ILL--WAS ALSO A SORT OF FRIEND. IT KEPT US FROM THE ENTROPY OF OUR APPETITES. OUR WISHES WERE OUR CAGES."

THE THINGS WE SAW COULD FILL BOOKS, AARON. THE INSIGHTS INTO WHAT DRIVES US, WHAT MAKES US WHO WE ARE CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT BE FORGOTTEN.
THESE TWILIGHT DREAMS WERE LIKE A STRANGE AND DAMNING APOCRYPHA FOR MANKIND.
WHEN WE CAME UPON RICK JONES, THOUGH, IT WAS A DIFFERENT MATTER.
THANK GOD YOU'RE HERE. I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU!

YOU WERE WAITING FOR US? THAT'S WEIRD...


HOW DID YOU KNOW THIS WAS A DREAM, RICK? THE SHARD OF THE COSMIC CUBE YOU TASTED SHOULD HAVE MADE EVERYTHING BEFORE THIS REALITY LIKE A DREAM.

I'VE MADE UP PEOPLE ALL MY LIFE, CAP, I JUST NEVER KNEW THIS WAS MY POWER.
I ACCIDENTALLY KILLED GENIS WITH MY POWER AND RECREATED A FUTURE VERSION OF HIM TO TAKE HIS PLACE.
STEVE, I'VE HAD IT WITH LIVING UNDER LIES.

WHEN I WAS THE AVENGERS' BOY MASCOT, ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS BE LIKE THEM.
I HAD A LOT TO LEARN.

DON'T WE ALL.

SO IT'S **AGREED** THEN. WHERE'S **MATT?**

I THINK HE'S CLEANING UP YOUR **MESS,** STEVE.

"AARON, **LISTEN** TO ME. IT'S ALL BEGINNING TO **COME TOGETHER.**

"THE **AVENGING HOST** IS COLLECTING THOSE RESCUED FROM THE PARADISE.

"THEY'RE FORMING AN **ARMY** TO FACE MAR-VELL. THEY'RE JUST WAITING FOR **MURDOCK** TO RETURN FROM DEATH'S REALM.

"HE CAN'T LEAVE THE PAST THE **WAY IT WAS...** HE CAN'T LET THE KINGPIN **OWN THE DEAD."**

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO YOURSELF **NOW,** FRANK?

I WAS SHOT...BUT I'M NOT DEAD?
WHAT DOES IT MEAN? YOU DON'T SURVIVE SOMETHING LIKE A BULLET TO THE HEAD!
PLEASE, GOD, HELP MY HUSBAND! HE'S A GOOD MAN!
HELP MY DADDY, GOD. SEND AN ANGEL TO HELP HIM.
EVEN IF IT'S ONE THAT DOESN'T HAVE HIS WINGS YET!
YOU CAN TELL THE KINGPIN TO GO TO HELL!
GOT YOU.

ELEKTRA?
MATT? BUT THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE... YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD, AREN'T YOU?
"I hope, for your sake, that you have not chosen to read this book because you are in the mood for a pleasant experience."
— Lemony Snicket

P A R A D I S E X

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER TEN

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

MAR-VELL BOY

"Mar-Vell?"

"Aaron? I… had forgotten you could transport here, of all places, to the Negative Zone."

"I am confused, Mar-Vell. As to what is happening. As to what your other self is doing. What he's done."

"I know, Aaron. We all are."

"Are you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're here. And you are a part of the kingdom of the Paradise. You led the collection for power on Earth to build the Paradise. That crusade killed Captain America and others. How can we know that leading Reed here doesn't somehow fit Mar-Vell's… your design?"

"I don't, Aaron. I don't know anything. After Death was killed and the Paradise was built, it all became a blank. Sometimes I see things in the Paradise, but I can't make them out. It's more like a sense of déjà vu than anything else. I know I should understand what I see, but I don't. When Adam Warlock and Eve gave birth to me, they did exactly what was intended. I'm just a human now."

"Why do you think you're still here?"

"I've thought about that a lot, Aaron. I mean, my job is done, I've lost my utility to my omniscient other self. I really have no power now to speak of, apart from Cap's shield. I can't add to the battle, can't help in any real way. It's like I'm the new Rick Jones or something. I can only guess… that…"

"What?"

"Well. That Mar-Vell, for only a very short time, had a taste of normality. Shortly before death on Titan, he found love again, found peace, and enjoyed the last of his days in a sort of normality. Perhaps, in light of whatever it is he is doing or set out to do when he built the Paradise, he wanted to know that a part of himself would have a chance at a similar experience. He wanted me… him to have a little life before… well, as I said, I don't know what's coming."

"Is what he is about to do evil?"

"I don't know. I am only a part of him, and a part that's sort of been clipped away, like a hangnail. He was a soldier to his people as well as their betrayer. He became a hero to others, an enemy to still more. He was given the power of a god, and learned how to defeat death. There are so many pieces of him, so many parts. His enemies would call him evil. His allies would call him good. The question may be whether he still considers us his allies. Or, if he indeed can see everything, whether it is even right that we be considered allies."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Only that we all have a unique and limited perception of the world around us. And, the world within…"

"Within?"

"Sure. Think about it. Mar-Vell first died and went to the realm of the dead because of the Black End, a disease Earthmen call cancer. And that cancer was a terrible evil that ended his life and future potential, at least we thought. But how different is that to humanity and its relation to the Celestials? You showed Reed, Aaron, that humanity was nothing more than antibodies meant to protect the growing Celestial in the core of the Earth. Earth's mutated peoples were meant to be germ-fighters, but in the end, they became the germ, they became the cancer to continued Celestial life. They began as allies, but became enemies."

"Okay."

"When Galactus first came to Earth years ago and was fought off by the Fantastic Four with the Watcher's aid, you all celebrated a great victory, not understanding that you had been used by the Watcher for the sake of the Celestial design. Galactus was then your enemy. But new knowledge came in time to suggest he was a friend and ally. And perhaps, there is still much to be known. But the point is that there isn't one of us that can know everything, and therefore judge with absolute certainty, what should happen next."

"No one except Mar-Vell, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I don't like the idea that I or the rest of humanity should be considered an enemy of the health of the universal balance just because of something like tunnel vision. Please tell me that in the same way something as small as an atom suggests an order to the universe, that our lives somehow mean something of what drives life."

"Before I was brought back to life, before I… Mar-Vell died… he didn't like the idea of not knowing what place he had in reality. What allegiances he had. I know you were not there, Aaron, but before Mar-Vell died, when he was withering away in bed, he received many visitors. From friends and allies. And even from enemies. Did you know that the Skrulls visited Mar-Vell there and honored him with a medal, and his own people, the Kree, did not?"

"No. What does that mean?"

"Only that there's a lot about me…. about Mar-Vell that we don't know. I do know, though, that he loved Earth. He loved humanity and you super heroes. And that may be enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Enough for him to reject the conclusion that will come in the face of all knowledge."

"What conclusion?"

"It's the same one Uatu told you years ago. What if he finds out that there is no good. There is no evil. There is no constant. Only change."

"I'm sorry, I don't think I understand. What conclusion?"

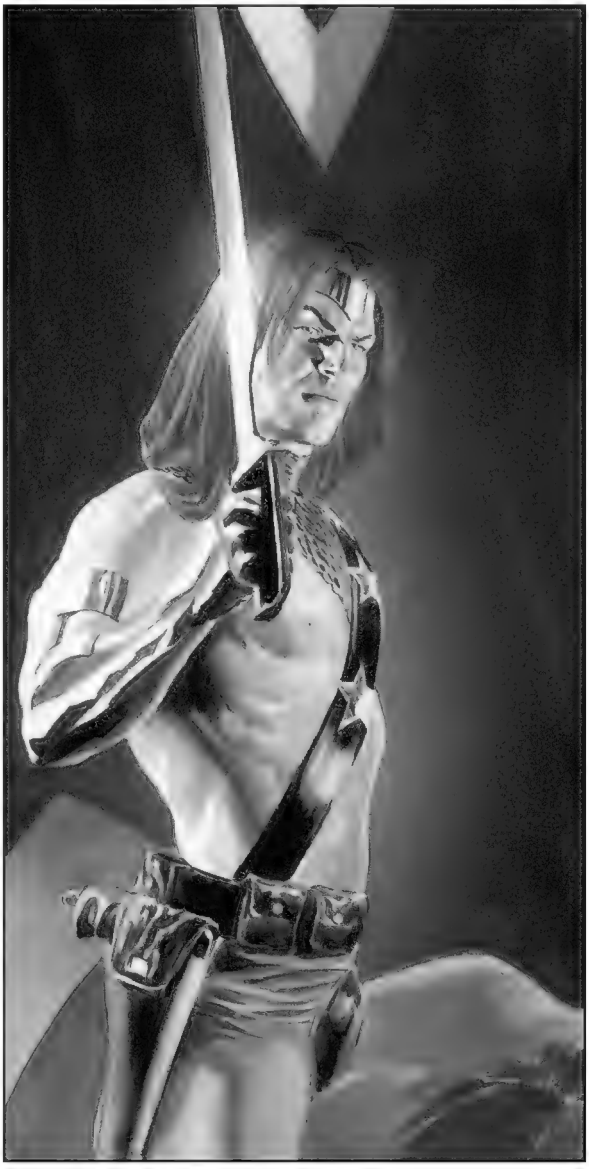
"That in light of the struggles between the Celestials and the Elders and the Kree and the Skrulls and the humans and the mutants and everything else, that nothing matters. That all is a collection of useless vanities. And for all our victories and everything else that seemed so clear through our limited perceptions, the truth is that none of it matters at all."

"I don't believe it."

"Neither do I, but who am I to judge? Mar-Vell may see that it would be better if none of us existed at all."

"Are you saying he might destroy everything?"

"Look at the Paradise, Aaron. It envelops new worlds and civilizations every day. Look, Aaron, and tell me what you see. Destroy everything? Maybe he already has and it's all just catching up to us."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You're a fool, Vance Astro, if you believe that you can change your future by listening to Arno Stark's words. He killed millions in his era."

"I'm tired of you, robot. I believe Stark can mutate the people of Earth. They'll be able to defend themselves from that alien invasion. That's all I need to know. You can solve the mysteries of time and space without me."

"There is much about time travel you do not understand, Vance. Its very design is the result of an unwillingness to accept reality. At its core is regret and a turning to the past instead of the future."

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying, Tin Tin. The future. You and all your friends are the past."

"Listen to me, Vance. If there's anything I've seen since everyone on the planet was mutated, it's this: not everyone should have power. Not everyone deserves it. And even less will do well with it."

"That's not for you to decide, X-51."

"I've made my decision. Time travel is a funny thing, Vance. I once believed that every trip through it created a new alternate version of the era you left, once you returned to it. A world where the thing you attempted to change in the past was indeed changed. I have since learned that there are certain points where one can enter a reality without changing it again. One of these points exists in your era, Vance. Unless I tell you the point of re-entry, the future you return to won't be the one you left. Unless you'd like your entire mission to have been for nothing, I'd like to know how you found out what was happening here."

"You're about to become a scrap heap, robot. There won't be enough of you left to recycle when I'm done."

"Whatever."

"I will break you...I will...will...okay. Okay, fine. If this is what I have to do, I'll play ball."

"Good."

"One of our historians unearthed a book written about the history of this time by Kyle Richmond. But it wasn't completed. We assumed that Nighthawk had died."

"I was wondering where that book had gone. Your historian is Mephisto, Astro. He sent you here hoping you would create another future for him to escape into. You will never save those people you want to save. The best you can hope for is to return to a future where the people of Earth can be mutated. But look around you, Astro. How much good will that do? You read Kyle's book. What did he write?"

"This was my decision, not my historian's."

"Then how did you know to come back here to the year 2003?"

I DON'T UNDERSTAND ALTERNATE REALITIES, ROBOT. WHAT PURPOSE DO THEY SERVE?
THEY EXIST BECAUSE MEPHISTO BELIEVED HE WAS THE DEVIL OF THE DOMINANT RELIGION. SO MUCH SO, THAT TO FLEE THE COMING SPOKEN-OF PROPHECY, HE CREATED ALTERNATE WORLDS TO ESCAPE INTO.
"WHAT I AM SHOWING YOU, VANCE, IS A CROSS-SECTION OF THIS MOMENT, FROM ONE ALTERNATE PRESENT TO ANOTHER.
"I HAVE LINKED THIS TO THE LIFELINES I FOUND AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD ASH TREE, THE PLACE WHERE MEPHISTO HID THE MAP OF HOW TO TRAVEL FROM ONE REALITY TO ANOTHER WITHOUT AFFECTING CHANGE IN THAT ERA.
"THIS IS HOW MEPHISTO REMAINED FREE TO MANIPULATE THEM ALL."
"WHAT'S GOING ON, ROBOT? ARE THESE THINGS ALL HAPPENING AT THE SAME TIME?"
"YOU SEE IT TOO, DON'T YOU?"
"WHEN I SEE TWO PEOPLE THAT ARE THE SAME PERSON, FROM ONE PRESENT TO ANOTHER...WELL, THEY'RE NOT THE SAME AGE...ONE'S YOUNGER THAN THE OTHER."
"WHEN I FIRST BECAME THE STEWARD OF THIS PLACE, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW THE ALTERNATE REALITIES WERE ORDERED...OR IF THERE EVEN WAS AN ORDER. NOW I DO, THANKS TO THE CROSS-SECTION FROM THE WORLD ASH.
"THE FURTHER FROM THE ORIGINAL SOURCE A PRESENT GETS, THE MORE SKEWED TIME BECOMES.
"IN THIS ERA, FOR EXAMPLE, REED RICHARDS NO LONGER FOUGHT IN WORLD WAR II, HE FOUGHT IN VIETNAM. AND I WOULD EXPECT THAT THERE ARE SOME ERAS THAT EXIST NOW WHERE HE NEVER FOUGHT AT ALL.
"TONY STARK NEVER CREATED WEAPONS THAT WERE USED FOR THE KOREAN WAR IN THIS ERA, HE DID IT FOR OPERATION DESERT STORM.
"IN STILL LATER ERAS...
"...IT WILL BE AS IF PETER PARKER WAS JUST BITTEN BY A RADIOACTIVE SPIDER. IT WILL BE AS IF HE HAD HIS WHOLE LIFE AHEAD OF HIM...BUT THAT LIFE WILL NEVER COME.
"THERE WILL BE NO HEROES, NO MARVELS, NO LIFETIMES OF HEROICS. ONLY A PERPETUAL MOMENT STRETCHED AROUND A CORE...A LIFETIME NO ONE WILL REMEMBER IS THERE.
"AND FOR THE WATCHERS, THERE WILL BE NOTHING NEW TO WATCH AT ALL."

THEN WHERE ARE WE? WHAT VERSION ARE WE? HOW FAR ARE WE FROM THE CORE?
AS TO THE VERSION WE ARE, WE'RE THE ONES WHO AREN'T GOING TO ACCEPT RE-CREATION FOR THE SAKE OF A DEVIL WE GIVE TOO MUCH CREDIT TO.
UATU?
I AM TIRED, AARON...I NO LONGER CARE FOR YOUR QUESTIONS... I NO LONGER CARE TO OFFER ANSWERS.
I'M GOING TO TAKE YOU TO EARTH, UATU. I'M GOING TO LET JUDE TOUCH YOU. I'M GOING TO LET YOU DIE...
...I WANT YOU TO GO TO DEATH'S REALM. I'M SURE YOU'LL HAVE EYES THERE.
WHY?
BECAUSE DESPITE ALL YOU'VE TOLD ME, I STILL BELIEVE IN CHARITY.
AND I BELIEVE IN OTHER WORLDS WHERE MEANING CAN BE FOUND...

"...OTHER WORLDS WHERE THE BATTLES DON'T SEEM TO BE OVER. OTHER WORLDS WHERE LIFE GOES ON...OR DOESN'T. BUT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, IT MATTERS."
THERE GOES STRETCH! OFF TA SAVE THE WHOLE BLAMED UNIVERSE WHILE THE REST'A US SIT HERE TWIDDLIN' OUR THUMBS!
THOSE OF US THAT GOT THUMBS, I MEAN.
WE'RE ALL THUMBS COMPARED TO REED, BEN...

"OF COURSE IT WOULD COME DOWN TO ***REED*** AND THE ***UNIVERSE***...

"...REALITY ISN'T ***BIG ENOUGH*** FOR THE TWO OF THEM."

DO YOU THINK RICHARDS WAS ***RIGHT*** ABOUT THE ANTI-MATTER HEART OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE AND THE ABSENCE OF MALICIOUS-NESS?

I AM PREPARED TO BELIEVE ***ANYTHING*** RICHARDS SUGGESTS... AND THIS IS WHAT ***WORRIES*** ME.

LIKE THE REST OF US, HE IS ONLY ***HUMAN.*** AND THAT MEANS HE COULD BE ***WRONG.***

I'M COMING, MAR-VELL. DO YOU HEAR ME? I'M COMING!

I SHOULD BE GOING WITH HIM, SUSAN.

NO, HYPERION. ONLY IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG.

JUST LIKE WE PLANNED.

"REED NEEDS TO SEE WHAT'S IN THERE."
I DON'T WANT TO FACE MAR-VELL WITHOUT MURDOCK... HE'S OUR ADVOCATE.
DOESN'T THIS ALL FEEL A LITTLE FAMILIAR? I DON'T WANT TO PLAY THE PART OF THE DEVIL AGAIN.
THERE WILL ALWAYS BE THOSE WHO LOOK UPON THE GOOD WE DO AND CALL IT EVIL.
BUT WE DO GOOD ANYWAY. I GET IT.

ZARDA!
HYPERION! I DREAMED OF YOU, BUT YOU WEREN'T THE SAME.
AND I, YOU.
THERESA! I CAN' BELIEVE IT!
DADDY!
GREAT TA SEE YA, DARLIN'.
I THINK I PREFERRED IT IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD...

"...AT LEAST WE COULD LIVE THE LIE TOGETHER THERE."
GIVE IT UP, FRANK! THERE'S A BETTER WAY!
BUT WE'RE ALL DEAD, MATT! THIS PLACE IS DEAD!
I KNEW YOU WERE MURDOCK, DEVIL! I KNEW IT!
MURDOCK'S DEAD, ANYWAY.
MATT!

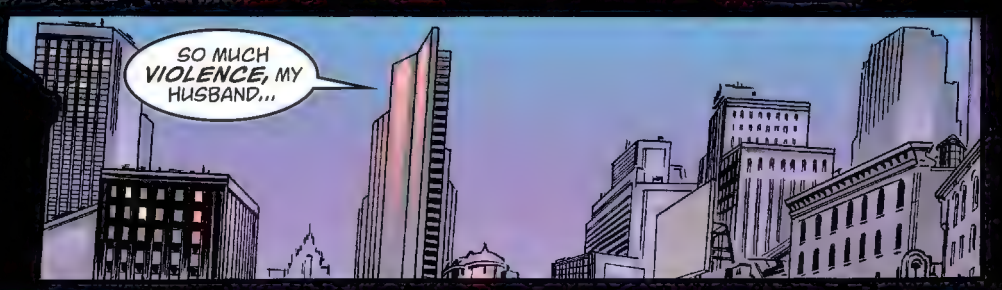
M-MATT?
MA...
...YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID ANYMORE.
IT'S TIME TO GO.
ELEKTRA...

PUT THE GUN AWAY, FRANK. YOUR BULLETS HAVE NO POWER HERE.

AND THEY'RE JUST SCARING PEOPLE.

FINE, MATT.
BUT I KILLED YOU, DEVIL... I KILLED YOU.

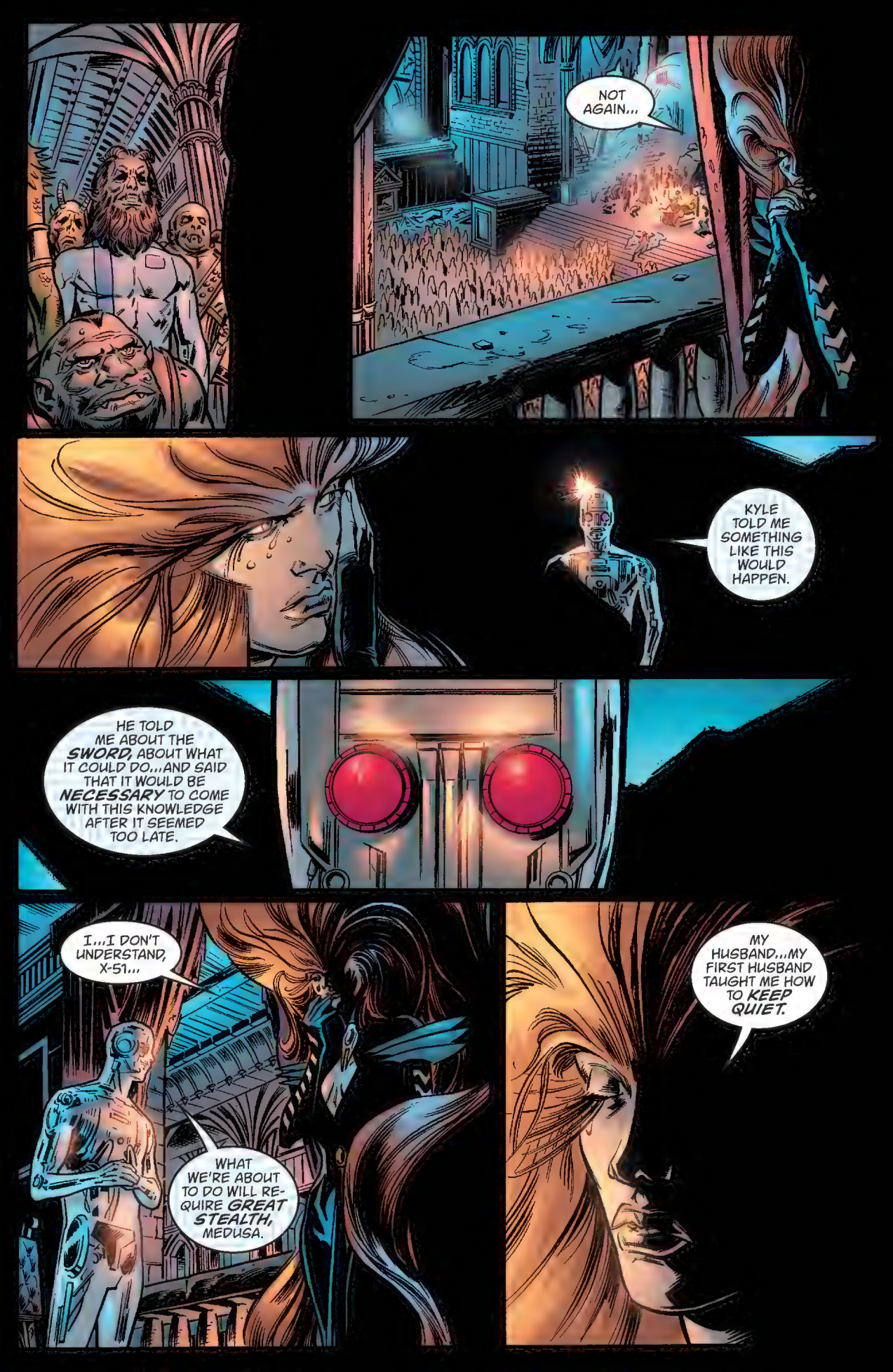
THERE IS NO KILLING HERE.

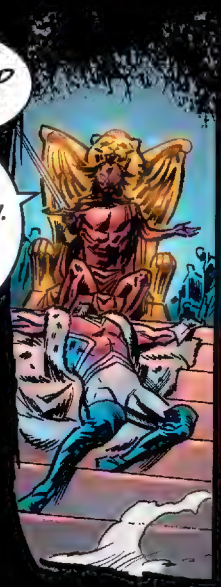

SO MUCH VIOLENCE, MY HUSBAND...

...IN YOUR VERY STREETS. CAN'T YOU DO ANYTHING TO STOP IT?

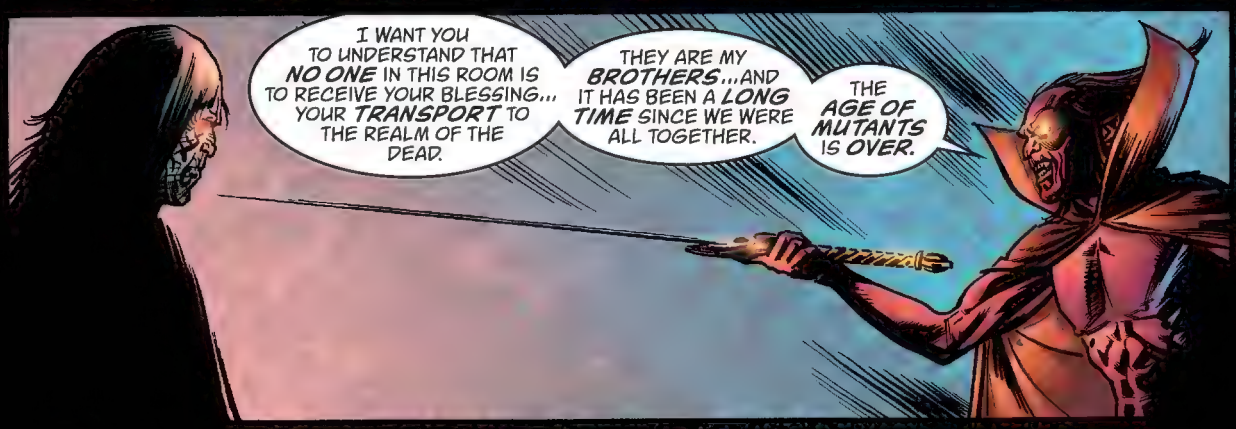
THEY ARE OLD GRIEVANCES, MY DEAR. OLD HATREDS.
I WOULD GET INVOLVED, BUT I HAVE ONE CONCERN...YOU. AND LIVING THE REST OF OUR LIVES TOGETHER.

KING BRITAIN IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE KING!
NOW, WHERE'S JUDE? THERE MUST BE A MEASURE OF PROTOCOL TO ESTABLISH!

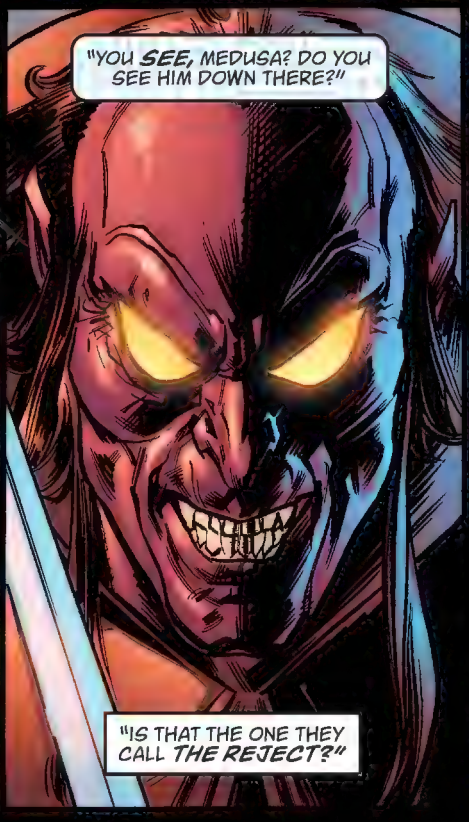

NOT AGAIN...
KYLE TOLD ME SOMETHING LIKE THIS WOULD HAPPEN.
HE TOLD ME ABOUT THE SWORD, ABOUT WHAT IT COULD DO...AND SAID THAT IT WOULD BE NECESSARY TO COME WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE AFTER IT SEEMED TOO LATE.
I...I DON'T UNDERSTAND, X-51...
WHAT WE'RE ABOUT TO DO WILL REQUIRE GREAT STEALTH, MEDUSA.
MY HUSBAND...MY FIRST HUSBAND TAUGHT ME HOW TO KEEP QUIET.


JUST SO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, JUDE...
...YOU KNOW THIS SWORD CAN KILL EVEN YOU. AND WHERE WOULD YOUR BLESSINGS BE THEN?

MY BLESSING IS NOT FOR ONE LIKE YOU, MOCKER. IT IS FOR THOSE THAT WILL RECEIVE IT WITH JOY.


I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT NO ONE IN THIS ROOM IS TO RECEIVE YOUR BLESSING... YOUR TRANSPORT TO THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
THEY ARE MY BROTHERS...AND IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE WE WERE ALL TOGETHER.
THE AGE OF MUTANTS IS OVER.

WE ARE THE FIRSTBORN OF THE CELESTIALS.
LET US CLAIM OUR BIRTH-RIGHT!


"YOU SEE, MEDUSA? DO YOU SEE HIM DOWN THERE?"
"IS THAT THE ONE THEY CALL THE REJECT?"

"THAT'S HIM...HE'S IN PLACE AS WE KNEW HE WOULD BE."
"WE?"

YOU.
WHY A MASK HERE? YOU ARE AMONG FAMILY.
BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT FAMILY.
NOR ARE YOU A TRUE DEVIANT.
YOUR FORM IS AN OPTION.
OUR FORMS CANNOT CHANGE.
HORRIBLE!
DISGUSTING CREATURE!
IT'S HIM... THE MOST HIDEOUS OF US ALL!
YOU CALL WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL UGLY, WHAT IS GOOD EVIL.
YOU'RE A MONSTER!

AND YOU ARE A FLY!
KILL IT!
THE AGE OF THE ETERNAL IS OVER! EVEN THOSE THAT LOOK LIKE THEM!
GIVE HIM TO JUDE! GIVE HIM TO JUDE!
YOU SEE, JUDE?
INDEED, MEPHISTO...YOU ARE A FITTING BROTHER TO THEM.

BRING HIM TO ME.

IF YOU COULD REBEL, ANY OF THEM COULD. I MUST BE CAREFUL... I CANNOT AFFORD A BEAUTIFUL DEVIANT.

THEY WILL SEE WHAT YOU ARE, JUST AS I HAVE--
:UGHK!:

THEY SEE YOU ARE NOW DEAD...

...AS ARE ALL THAT OPPOSE US!

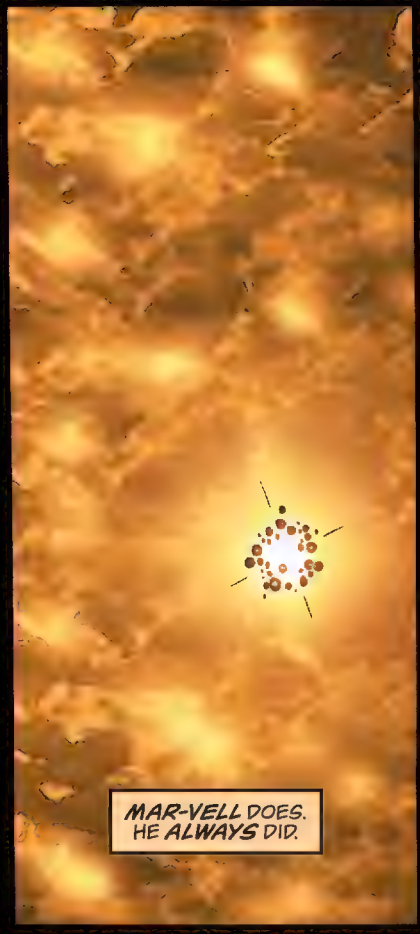
SCOTT? SCOTT?

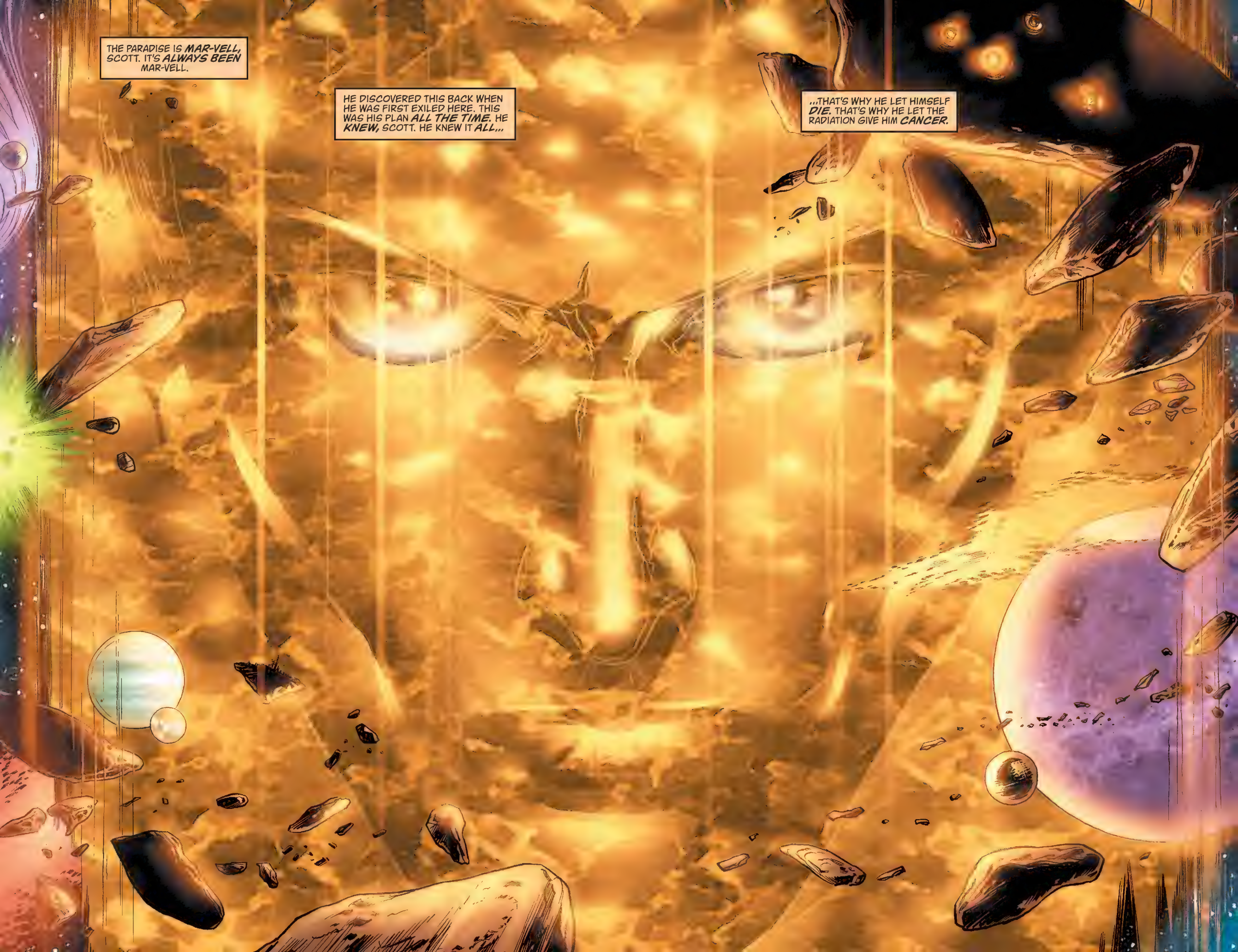
JEAN...PHOENIX. REED RICHARDS IS ABOUT TO ENTER THE PARADISE.
I KNOW. MAR-VELL KNOWS.

HE DOES? HOW?

HE'S ALWAYS KNOWN, SCOTT. JUST AS HE KNEW WHAT YOU WOULD DO TO ME. HOW YOU WOULD CHANGE ME.

CHANGE YOU? I DON'T UNDERSTAND...


MAR-VELL DOES. HE ALWAYS DID.


THE PARADISE IS MAR-VELL, SCOTT. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN MAR-VELL.
HE DISCOVERED THIS BACK WHEN HE WAS FIRST EXILED HERE. THIS WAS HIS PLAN ALL THE TIME. HE KNEW, SCOTT. HE KNEW IT ALL...
...THAT'S WHY HE LET HIMSELF DIE. THAT'S WHY HE LET THE RADIATION GIVE HIM CANCER.

HE KNEW YOUR LOVE WOULD CHANGE ME. HE KNEW I'D AGREE WITH HIM.
I...I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND.
YOU WILL, SCOTT. YOU WILL.
I DON'T KNOW HOW TA TELL YA THIS, SUZE...
REED?
I'LL GET HIM.

OH, BEN... HE'S NEVER COMING BACK...
IT'S NOT OVER, SUZY. STRETCH'S BEEN IN WORSE SITUATIONS. WELL, ALMOST AS BAD. I MEAN...
HYPERION--? BUT THE ANTI-MATTER COULD KILL HIM...
I HOPE IT DOES...
...RIGHT AFTER I RESCUE RICHARDS.
Sandy: I can't believe what you're finding out. Are you gonna continue with this?
Jeffrey: Yeah.
Sandy: Until when? I mean, what are you going to do with this stuff?
Jeffrey: Well, I don't know.
Sandy: You're not going back to her apartment. (Jeffrey nods.) Jeffrey, why?
Jeffrey: I'm seeing something that was always hidden. I'm involved in a mystery. I'm in the middle of a mystery and it's all secret.
Sandy: You like mysteries that much?
Jeffrey: Yeah. You're a mystery. I like you, very much.
— David Lynch, BLUE VELVET

P A R A D I S E X

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER ELEVEN

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

QUEEN MEDUSA

"These are horrible creatures. Horrible, hateful things. They must be wiped from the surface of the Earth."

"Who, Medusa? The Deviants?"

"Yes, Aaron. They're monsters. They killed Brian, then that other one with the mask, the one they said was one of their own."

"It is ironic, isn't it, that you said 'surface of the Earth'. For so long they played our demons, and hid below the cities that lay on the Earth's surface. They are so much like your own Inhuman Alpha Primitives, and how they were treated by your Inhuman society, are they not?"

"No. No, no. How dare you suggest… why would you… ?"

"Because you have no right to judge them, Queen Medusa. In every realm, of every moment of history I have looked at, the want for equality has been the basis upon which wars are fought and people die. And that is the great regret of it all."

"How dare you compare what they've done to the Inhuman ruling party's decisions? Why?"

"Because it has not changed. Since the beginning of human, and Inhuman history, it has not changed."

"The struggle for equality?"

"Not exactly. It's the struggle for what we have versus what we want. The Kree/Skrull War that has so shaped our place in the universe began with envy. You, too, have envied, Queen Medusa. I have seen it."

"I am a queen. I have no want for material wants or needs."

"It is so strange to see this now, Medusa. To realize that envy begins in the watching. Those who see the most, envy the most. It's almost a universal weakness. You, too, have it. We all do. I envy your humanity. And have many questions about whether or not I truly live. And you, you envy those without."

"Without? Without what?"

"Have you ever wondered where your emotions come from, Queen Medusa? Where the love you had for a husband that never spoke to you might come from?"

"It came from knowing I was Queen. He needed me. My people needed a Queen."

"But what of you? What did you want?"

"I… what did I…?"

"You were a Queen, Medusa. And yet you speak as if you were a slave — to a husband that could never

speak, to a people that often despised you. Did you not want, at times, to be like them? To be free of the need to serve them? To make decisions for yourself?"

"No."

"I have seen so much. You cannot pull the wool over my eyes. I was built to be the equal emotionally of humanity, Queen Medusa. You can see inside me, at my gears and my pistons. Well, I have learned the heart of your very people. I too see. And at times, no longer even desire to be human. Humanity says it wants equality, but what you really want is another life, one, by limited perspective, that seems so much better than your own."

"I..."

"It was true for Maximus, King Black Bolt's insane brother, just as it is for you, Queen Medusa. It is true for individuals and societies and races alike. It is at the heart of all conflict, all bigotry, all racial friction."

"But Aaron, you are suggesting that the only way to peace is through the lack of desire. The absolution of want."

"No, I'm not. I am saying, though, that that desire for more than you have is the foundation of conflict."

"Your husband mutated the world into Inhumans so that your people would not be condemned as an inferior race by humanity who had not yet learned that they themselves had become the inferior people. As difficult as your marriage may have been for you, Black Bolt was a perfect King. And his decision was one that recognized the imperfections of potential superhumanity. I remember asking Uatu about why humanity turned on its super-powered champions. Why Spider-Man always had an NYPD rap sheet; why the X-Men were always considered threats; why I was hunted and why all those heroes that did swear their political allegiances and service to a nation and its people would always be considered villains. Uatu said it was merely human nature. I suppose he was right. Look at what happened to Jim Hammond."

"Jim Hammond?"

"The original Human Torch."

"You'll have to forgive me, I don't really remember him."

"Not many do anymore. He was one of the first heroes. He killed Hitler in World War II. Isn't that amazing. And still, we do not remember him."

"I'm afraid we lived in seclusion, completely separate from your race, at that point. So, despite your history books, World War can hardly be the proper term."

"Perhaps you remember another war, Medusa, one just before the mutations began. This was just before I was taken to the moon to become the new Watcher. It was during mankind's second struggle against the Atlanteans (some of whom were recently and regrettably set free by accident by Ben Grimm from their incarceration). Hammond was forced to become a criminal in the eyes of the world. He did this to guarantee that the Atlanteans, despite all their faults and crimes against humanity, not perish. Hammond was there at the beginning of mankind's mutations, Medusa. He was there to witness the beginning, and he knew that such mass attacks against a species often don't solve the problem, but change the problem into something else."

"You're speaking of mutation?"

"If I have to use that word again. I'm speaking of change. The old Watcher, Uatu, said all there was to see was about birth, death and change. I now begin to see that he was not right at all. There is no change at all. At least, there hasn't been so far."

"I remember Uatu."

"There's a theory that the mere act of witnessing something changes it. We were able to warn the alternate worlds of the Celestial embryo growing within them by letting the indigenous peoples of those Earths become aware that they were being watched. Who knows, perhaps beyond Uatu, there are still others watching us now. Perhaps even envying us now. But I wonder, too, about them. About the Watchers."

"Be careful, Aaron, or you will lose me completely."

"What I'm saying is that if it may be true that the object one watches can be changed from the watching, then certainly it must be true that the Watcher is also changed by what he... or she... sees. Uatu is dying, well, perpetually in the process of dying. And yet, he seems sad. Tired, emotionally. I think he has been changed. And hates it."

"How can this offer any hope for this moment, though, Aaron? Mephisto is on the throne of the world. His demons and deviants. Are you suggesting that Mephisto has changed?"

"No. Look at what just happened, Medusa. Look at Mephisto. An evil man has just taken the throne, and the mob loves it. This mob here. They have "Voted" for it. They have seized power for themselves. Because of what they saw, because of what they wanted. They would now claim to be the genetic superiors. And they are in the position to do so. But the Deviants have been manipulated as much as all of us. As much as all of mankind. They are not hateful because they have chosen to be, but because they were manipulated to be that way. We're going to show them something they have not seen before. I'm... we're going to save them. And perhaps ourselves in the process."

"You... you want me to have concern... for them. After what they did to Brian? How...?"

"Watch."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I am the Watchman of Earth. Model number X-51. Some say I am simply a program-deluded robot, a push-button man. I have often responded to these allegations by explaining that I was created to be human...a thinking and feeling computer, to have
independent thought. I am no mere robot, I would say with programmed dignity.

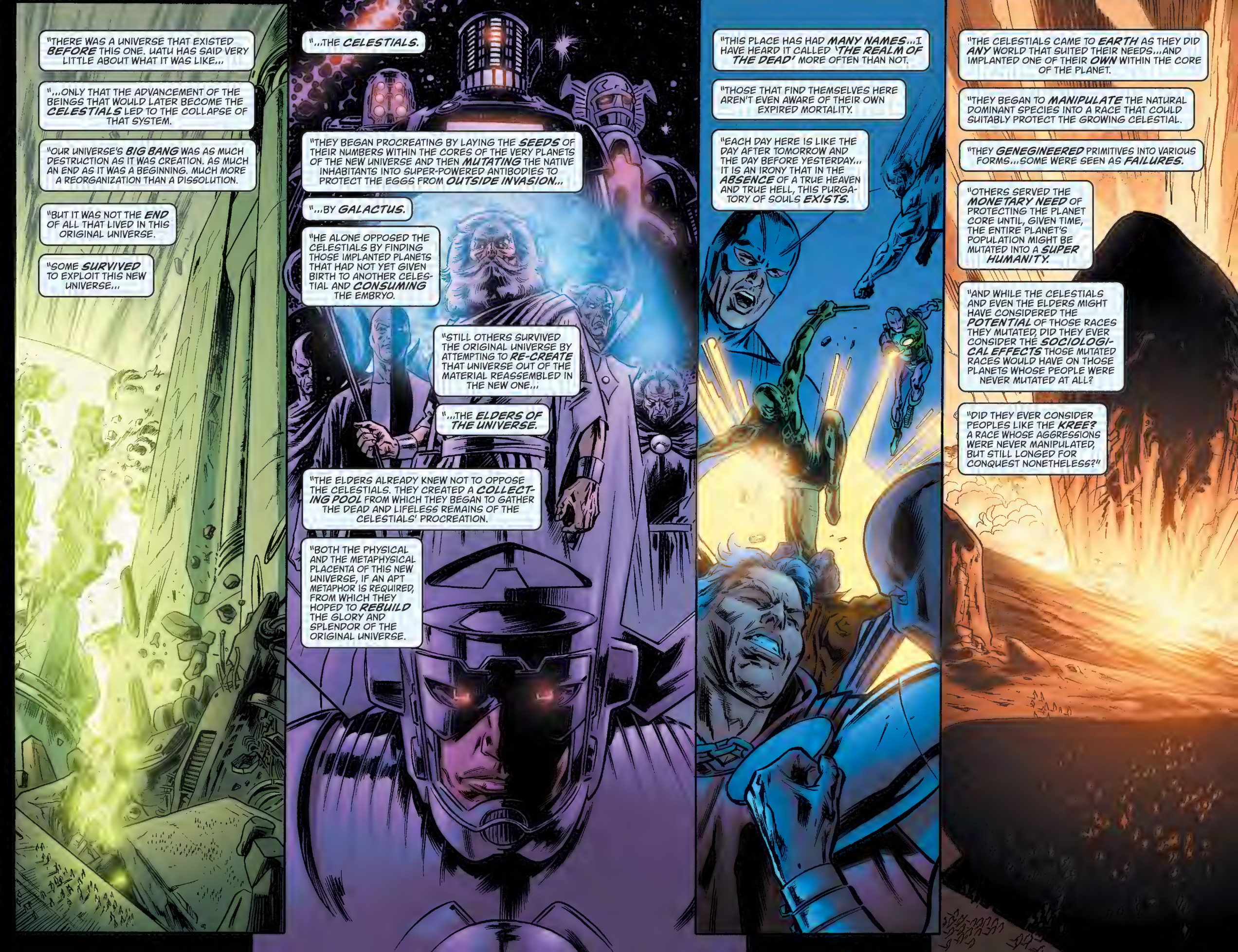
"But now, I believe that perhaps I was wrong. I am a robot. For what is independent thought when considering genetic destiny or the nurture of family and social values? I have watched all of human history. And now I doubt all of humanity. I doubt the freedom I once took as axiom. The man that built me gave me his personality. How different is that from being born into a family? Perhaps in the end, when everything that defines each one of us is on the line, we do what we must. We accept only what we've been built to accept. We do only what life has prepared us to do. We decide only what we have been prepared for and given inclination to choose. I have recently watched so many champions fall in hopes of a better world. Captain America. Iron Man. Norrin Radd. And now, perhaps, Reed Richards is dead, as well.

"If I were to ask Earth's former Watcher, Uatu, what these acts mean, he would tell me that these acts were the equivalent of any other act. They mean nothing. Heroism means nothing. Mankind's only purpose in the universe is to be a cog in the process of Celestial Propagation.

"I cannot deny the purpose that the Celestials would have humanity serve. And perhaps that is all that we've been genetically destined for. But there's more, there's far more than an act of manipulation that dates back to the dawn of civilization. There's everything that happened between then and now.

"Maybe in the end, we're all robots. The question is whether we will serve a programming that damned us long ago, or one that has been forged in the history of the people of Earth since.

"Perhaps being a cog is all we've been told we can look forward to, but there's something far greater that we Robots of Earth have been built for."


"THERE WAS A UNIVERSE THAT EXISTED BEFORE THIS ONE. UATU HAS SAID VERY LITTLE ABOUT WHAT IT WAS LIKE...
"...ONLY THAT THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE BEINGS THAT WOULD LATER BECOME THE CELESTIALS LED TO THE COLLAPSE OF THAT SYSTEM.
"OUR UNIVERSE'S BIG BANG WAS AS MUCH DESTRUCTION AS IT WAS CREATION. AS MUCH AN END AS IT WAS A BEGINNING. MUCH MORE A REORGANIZATION THAN A DISSOLUTION.
"BUT IT WAS NOT THE END OF ALL THAT LIVED IN THIS ORIGINAL UNIVERSE.
"SOME SURVIVED TO EXPLOIT THIS NEW UNIVERSE...
"...THE CELESTIALS.
"THEY BEGAN PROCREATING BY LAYING THE SEEDS OF THEIR NUMBERS WITHIN THE CORES OF THE VERY PLANETS OF THE NEW UNIVERSE AND THEN MUTATING THE NATIVE INHABITANTS INTO SUPER-POWERED ANTIBODIES TO PROTECT THE EGGS FROM OUTSIDE INVASION...
"...BY GALACTUS.
"HE ALONE OPPOSED THE CELESTIALS BY FINDING THOSE IMPLANTED PLANETS THAT HAD NOT YET GIVEN BIRTH TO ANOTHER CELESTIAL AND CONSUMING THE EMBRYO.
"STILL OTHERS SURVIVED THE ORIGINAL UNIVERSE BY ATTEMPTING TO RE-CREATE THAT UNIVERSE OUT OF THE MATERIAL REASSEMBLED IN THE NEW ONE...
"...THE ELDERS OF THE UNIVERSE.
"THE ELDERS ALREADY KNEW NOT TO OPPOSE THE CELESTIALS. THEY CREATED A COLLECTING POOL FROM WHICH THEY BEGAN TO GATHER THE DEAD AND LIFELESS REMAINS OF THE CELESTIALS' PROCREATION.
"BOTH THE PHYSICAL AND THE METAPHYSICAL PLACENTA OF THIS NEW UNIVERSE, IF AN APT METAPHOR IS REQUIRED, FROM WHICH THEY HOPED TO REBUILD THE GLORY AND SPLENDOR OF THE ORIGINAL UNIVERSE.
"THIS PLACE HAS HAD MANY NAMES...I HAVE HEARD IT CALLED 'THE REALM OF THE DEAD' MORE OFTEN THAN NOT.
"THOSE THAT FIND THEMSELVES HERE AREN'T EVEN AWARE OF THEIR OWN EXPIRED MORTALITY.
"EACH DAY HERE IS LIKE THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW AND THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY... IT IS AN IRONY THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF A TRUE HEAVEN AND TRUE HELL, THIS PURGATORY OF SOULS EXISTS.
"THE CELESTIALS CAME TO EARTH AS THEY DID ANY WORLD THAT SUITED THEIR NEEDS...AND IMPLANTED ONE OF THEIR OWN WITHIN THE CORE OF THE PLANET.
"THEY BEGAN TO MANIPULATE THE NATURAL DOMINANT SPECIES INTO A RACE THAT COULD SUITABLY PROTECT THE GROWING CELESTIAL.
"THEY GENEGINEERED PRIMITIVES INTO VARIOUS FORMS...SOME WERE SEEN AS FAILURES.
"OTHERS SERVED THE MONETARY NEED OF PROTECTING THE PLANET CORE UNTIL, GIVEN TIME, THE ENTIRE PLANET'S POPULATION MIGHT BE MUTATED INTO A SUPER HUMANITY.
"AND WHILE THE CELESTIALS AND EVEN THE ELDERS MIGHT HAVE CONSIDERED THE POTENTIAL OF THOSE RACES THEY MUTATED, DID THEY EVER CONSIDER THE SOCIOLOGICAL EFFECTS THOSE MUTATED RACES WOULD HAVE ON THOSE PLANETS WHOSE PEOPLE WERE NEVER MUTATED AT ALL?
"DID THEY EVER CONSIDER PEOPLES LIKE THE KREE? A RACE WHOSE AGGRESSIONS WERE NEVER MANIPULATED, BUT STILL LONGED FOR CONQUEST NONETHELESS?"

"ON EARTH, THE KREE MANIPULATED PART OF HUMANITY BY TRIGGERING THEIR LATENT ***MUTAGENIC POTENTIALS.***

"THEY CREATED A RACE OF ***INHUMANS*** THAT THEY HOPED TO USE AS ***WEAPONS*** AGAINST THEIR ENEMIES. TO SERVE AS THE ***SOLDIERS*** THE KREE THEMSELVES COULD NOT BE.

"THIS RACE, THOUGH, WOULD ***REJECT*** THE NOTION OF BEING WEAPONS, AND REMAIN ON EARTH TO LIVE ***SEPARATE*** FROM MANKIND.

"THE KREE WOULD CONSIDER THE INHUMANS YET ***ANOTHER FAILURE.***

"BUT WHEN THE KREE RETURNED TO EARTH, IT WAS ***NOT*** TO COLLECT THE INHUMANS. IT WAS FOR ***CONQUEST*** OF THE ***MUTATED HUMANITY*** ON EARTH. ***MUTANITY*** WOULD BE THEIR ***ARMY.***

"ONE OF THEIR NUMBER, ***MAR-VELL,*** CAME AS A ***SPY.*** BUT HE LEARNED TO ***LOVE*** THIS WORLD, AND BECAME ITS ***CHAMPION.***

"HE CAME TO LOVE THE PLANET'S ***PEOPLES;*** ITS ***CULTURE;*** ITS ***HISTORY;*** ITS ***FAITHS.*** THERE WAS NO BELIEF IN AN ***AFTERLIFE*** ON HIS NATIVE WORLD.

"AND SO HE ***ADOPTED*** ALL HE COULD OF EARTH. HE CONSIDERED THOSE HEROES HE CAME TO ENSLAVE AS HIS ***FRIENDS*** AND ***ALLIES.***

"YET ONE DAY, ***HE DIED.***

"AND IN THAT COLLECTIVE POOL THE ELDERS HAD CREATED, HE BEGAN TO PLAN HIS ***ESCAPE.***

"MAR-VELL WAS ***REBORN*** IN THE PAST FEW YEARS TO LEAD THE HEROES OF THIS WORLD ON A ***QUEST*** TO COLLECT WEAPONS, ARTIFACTS AND RAW MATERIALS THAT HE TRANSPORTED TO THAT PART OF HIMSELF THAT STILL EXISTED IN THE AFTERLIFE COLLECTING POOL.

"MAR-VELL USED ONE WEAPON HE'D FOUND TO ***NULLIFY*** THE 'ELDER' KNOWN AS ***DEATH,*** THUS CREATING A ***LEAK*** IN THE COLLECTIVE POOL.

"IT WAS THROUGH THIS LEAK THAT THE INHABITANTS OF THE REALM OF THE DEAD COULD ***ESCAPE*** INTO...

"...A ***PARADISE.***

"MAR-VELL USED EVERYTHING HE'D COLLECTED TO ***BUILD*** THIS PARADISE. THOSE THAT ESCAPED WITH HIM FOUND AN AFTERLIFE WHERE THEIR ***WILDEST DREAMS*** WERE WAITING TO BE REALIZED FOR THEM.

"MAR-VELL EVEN USED HIS POWER TO ***FURTHER*** MUTATE OR TRANSFIGURE CERTAIN CHAMPIONS OF THE PRIOR WORLD TO A STATE OF ALMOST ***ANGELIC PROPORTIONS.***

"THESE WERE HIS CHAMPIONS TO COLLECT ***MORE SOULS*** FROM THE REALM OF THE DEAD FOR THIS PLACE...JUST AS THE CELESTIALS ONCE CREATED THE DEVIANTS AND ETERNALS TO PREPARE THE WORLD'S PEOPLE FOR ITS MUTAGENIC CHANGES.

"THE PARADISE BEGAN TO ***EXPAND*** WITH EACH NEW BEING MADE A CITIZEN OF IT, MOVING OUT INTO THE ***NEGATIVE ZONE.***

"BY NOW THE EXPANDING PARADISE HAS DESTROYED ***DOZENS*** OF WORLDS, SWALLOWING THEM WHOLE. FEW RACES HAVE ***SURVIVED*** THEIR ATTEMPTS TO ESCAPE FROM ITS ONSLAUGHT.

"MANY THINK OF MAR-VELL AS A HERO, BECAUSE OF WHAT HE'S DONE FOR THEM... BUT FOR THOSE SURVIVORS THAT HAVE ESCAPED, HIS ADVANCING PARADISE IS NOTHING LESS THAN ***ARMAGEDDON.***"

"PERHAPS THE GREATEST HERO ON EARTH, ***REED RICHARDS,*** THE MAN WHO FIRST DISCOVERED THE NEGATIVE ZONE, HAS NOW GONE TO ***CONFRONT*** MAR-VELL...

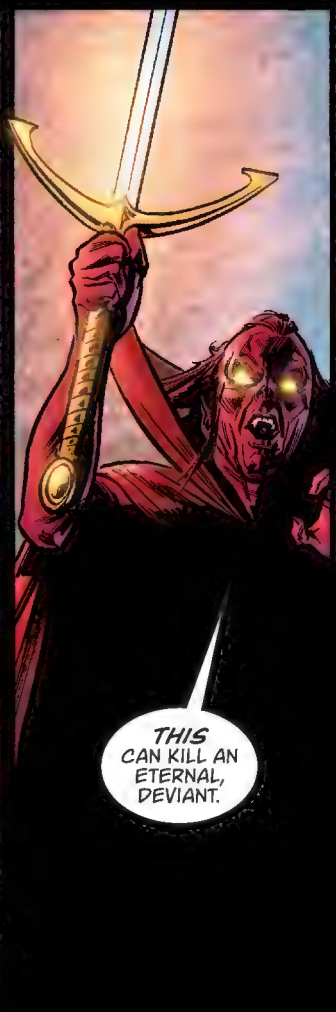
"...TO DISCOVER IF, IN CREATING HEAVEN, ***HELL*** HAS ALSO COME. FOR ALL I KNOW, REED IS ***DEAD,*** MEDUSA. LIKE YOUR ***HUSBAND.*** LIKE ***KING BRITAIN.***"

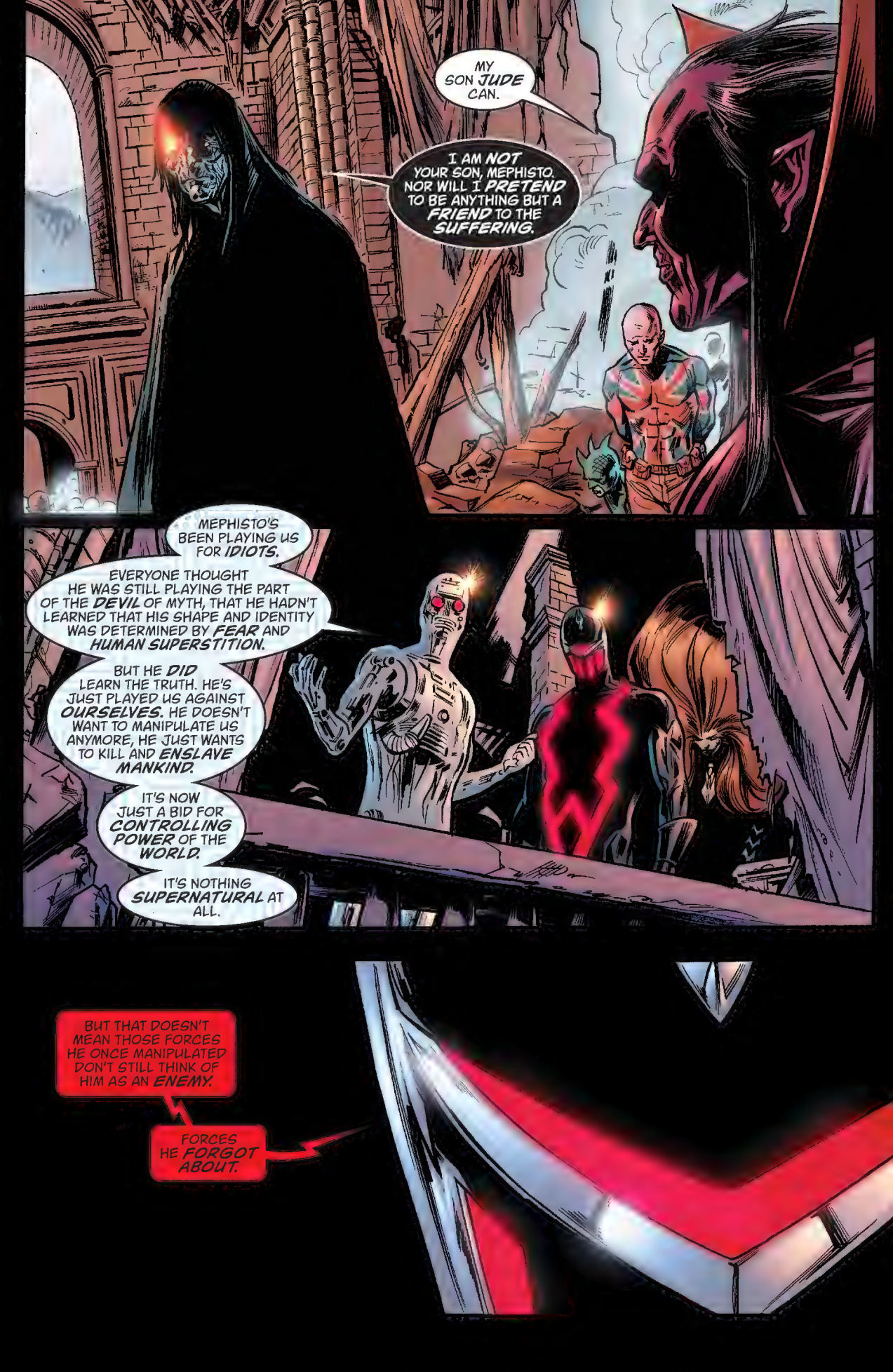
HE KILLED HIM!
NO DEVIANT IS PERMITTED TO KILL ANOTHER DEVIANT!
NO MATTER HOW HIDEOUS THE FORM!

BROTHERS! AS I WAS PERHAPS THE FIRST DEVIANT, LET ME ASSURE YOU--THIS--THIS "CREATURE" WAS NOT ONE OF US!
HE WAS AN ETERNAL!

"WAS" BEING THE OPTIMUM UNDERSTANDING.

BUT YOU CAN'T KILL AN ETERNAL! THE CELESTIALS THAT MADE THEM TO BE OUR SUPERIORS MADE CERTAIN OF THAT!


THIS CAN KILL AN ETERNAL, DEVIANT.

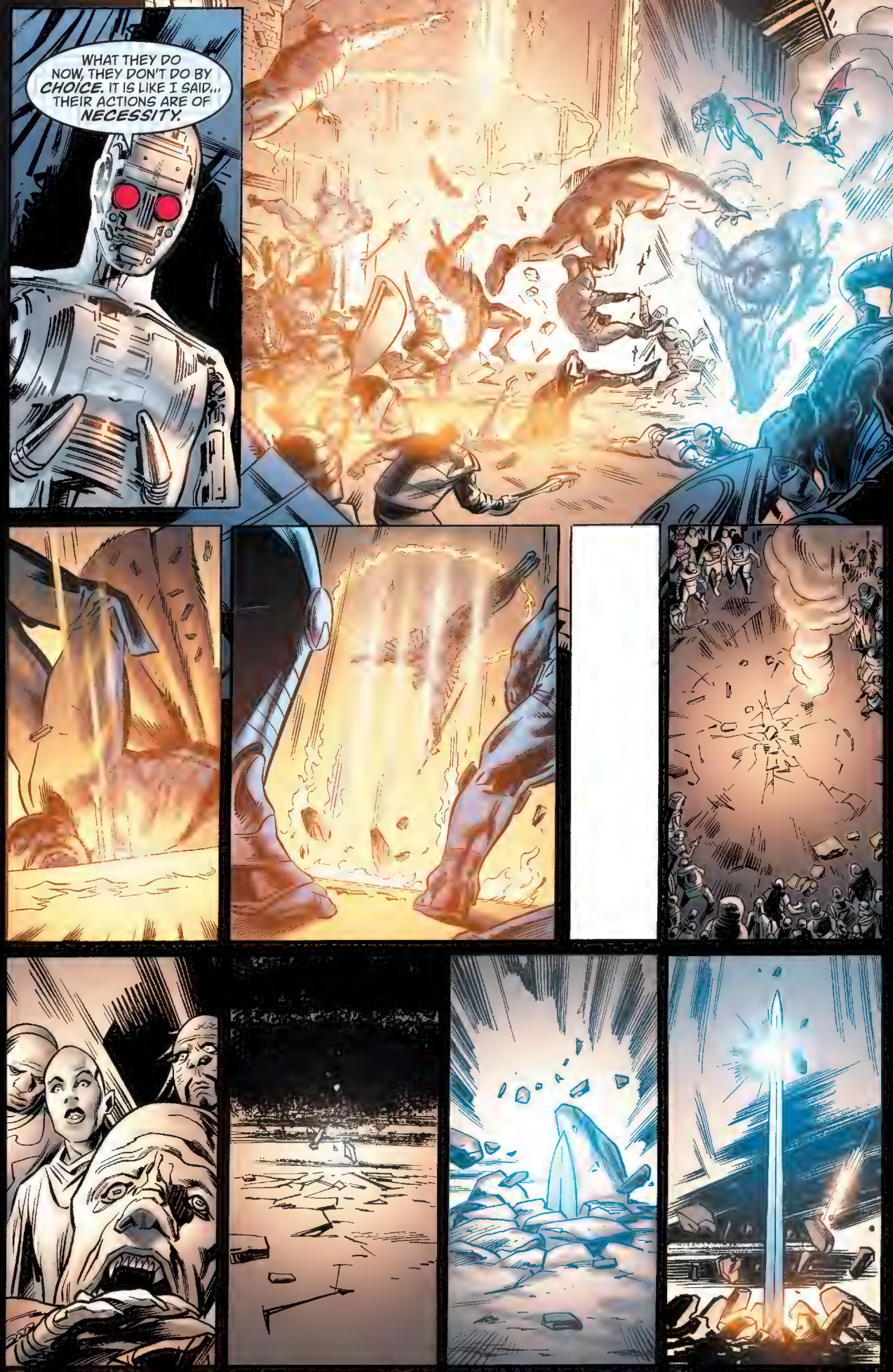

MY SON JUDE CAN.
I AM NOT YOUR SON, MEPHISTO. NOR WILL I PRETEND TO BE ANYTHING BUT A FRIEND TO THE SUFFERING.
MEPHISTO'S BEEN PLAYING US FOR IDIOTS.
EVERYONE THOUGHT HE WAS STILL PLAYING THE PART OF THE DEVIL OF MYTH, THAT HE HADN'T LEARNED THAT HIS SHAPE AND IDENTITY WAS DETERMINED BY FEAR AND HUMAN SUPERSTITION.
BUT HE DID LEARN THE TRUTH. HE'S JUST PLAYED US AGAINST OURSELVES. HE DOESN'T WANT TO MANIPULATE US ANYMORE, HE JUST WANTS TO KILL AND ENSLAVE MANKIND.
IT'S NOW JUST A BID FOR CONTROLLING POWER OF THE WORLD.
IT'S NOTHING SUPERNATURAL AT ALL.
BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THOSE FORCES HE ONCE MANIPULATED DON'T STILL THINK OF HIM AS AN ENEMY.
FORCES HE FORGOT ABOUT.

MY BROTHERS! THIS WORLD HAS BEEN MADE INTO A HELL BY THOSE THAT CLAIMED TO BE ON THE SIDE OF THE ANGELS!
AND THEY CALL US DEMONS.
WE HAVE EACH BEEN MANIPULATED INTO BELIEVING WE ARE SOMETHING WE ARE NOT.
I WAS SHAPED BY HUMAN MYTH. I BELIEVED THE DESTINIES SET UPON ME.
SUCH MYTH WOULD HAVE ME SLAIN ON THE POINT OF THE SWORD I NOW HOLD IN MY HAND.
THE SAME MYTHS SAY IT IS THE ANGELS THAT WIN DOMINANCE OVER THE EARTH. THE MEEK THAT INHERIT THIS WORLD.
I, FOR ONE, AM TIRED OF BEING CONTROLLED BY FAIRY TALES.

DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU OVERBLOATED FAIRY TALE?
TRY LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER NOW!
AH, TIME FOR ONE LAST ATTEMPT FROM THE "HEROES" TO SAVE THE DAY. YOU'D THINK THAT IN LIGHT OF EVERYTHING THAT HAS CHANGED, THAT WOULD, TOO.

WHAT IS THIS, MEPHISTO?
IT IS A TRICK, MY BROTHERS! A TRICK!
DECEIT IS NOT OUR WAY, MEPHISTO. IT IS NOT THE WAY OF THE ANCIENT MAGICS.
THE SWORD!
GET THE SWORD!

NOW, DEVIL! IT ALL COMES TO AN END NOW!
YOU HAVE NO IDEA! I AM BEYOND ANY OF YOU NOW!
YOU'RE DEAD! LIKE YOUR FATHER BEFORE YOU!
NO...
I'VE... ¿UGH¿... GOT... IT...
I...HAVE... IT...MERLIN... I HAVE...THE... SWORD...
THE SWORD... GIVE IT TO ME!
...MERLIN?
MEPHISTO?


WHAT THEY DO NOW, THEY DON'T DO BY CHOICE. IT IS LIKE I SAID... THEIR ACTIONS ARE OF NECESSITY.

YOU HAVE LOST, DEVIL!
COME, EMBRACE THE BLESSING, SAD ONE.
NO--!
WHAT?
AGHH!!
THE SWORD... IT...
"YES, IT CUTS THE MANIPULATED FROM THE MANIPULATION."

"IT HEALS THE HOST TO A DEGREE OF WHAT THE CELESTIALS DID TO IT. IT WILL EQUALIZE THE DEVIANTS TO THE ETERNALS. BEAUTY SHALL REIGN UNDER IT."
MY BROTHERS... HEL...HELP-P-PP...ME...
THE SWORD CAN DO THAT? WE CAN BE LIKE...LIKE THE ETERNALS?
YES.
BUT...I... KILLED YOU...
YOU DID. BUT NOT THE WAY YOU THINK.
I...

IT SEEMS YOU WERE WRONG ABOUT HER, MOTHER.
MEGGAN! YOU...
YOU SAVED YOUR PEOPLE... AND YOU SAVED YOUR KING.
THERE IS NOTHING MORE A QUEEN COULD DO.

BRIAN... THE TIME FOR MOURNING IS NOT YET UPON US.
IT NEVER IS, BETSY. IT NEVER IS.
HELLO, JUDE. I KNEW YOUR PREDECESSOR BETTER THAN MOST. I MET HER TWICE.
THAT IS QUITE REMARKABLE, TO EMBRACE THE BLESSING TWICE. YOU ARE A LUCKY MAN.
YES... A LUCKY MAN.
HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE BURIAL OF KING ARTHUR?

"WHEN ARTHUR'S REIGN ENDED, HE WAS SENT INTO THE ***SEA*** TO COME TO A PLACE WHERE HIS BODY MIGHT ***REST*** FOR HIS EVENTUAL RETURN. WHERE HE MIGHT BE... ***BLESSED.***

"I KNOW OF AN ***ISLAND,*** JUDE. IT WAS DISCOVERED BY THE ***X-MEN*** QUITE A WHILE AGO. I'M SUGGESTING THAT I GIVE IT TO YOU, THAT IT BE YOUR ***PLACE OF OPERATION.*** YOUR PLACE OF ***BLESSING OTHERS.***

"WE DO NEED YOU, JUDE, BUT IT IS NOT A BLESSING TO THE HEALTHY, IT IS A ***HORROR.*** IT IS ONLY A ***BALM*** FOR THOSE READY TO GO JOIN THEIR LOVED ONES IN THE REALM OF THE DEAD.

"WE COULD BRING THEM TO YOU, IF YOU WERE ***WILLING.***

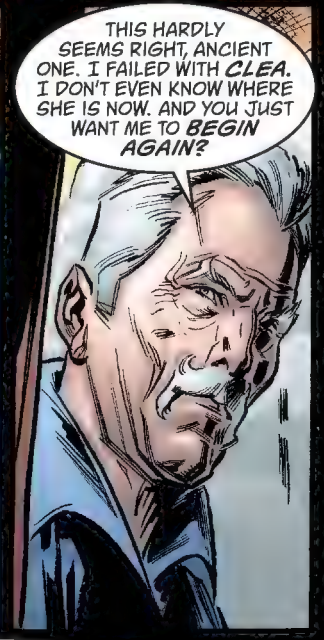
"WE COULD ***HELP YOU*** IN YOUR CRUSADE TO ***HELP MANKIND.***"

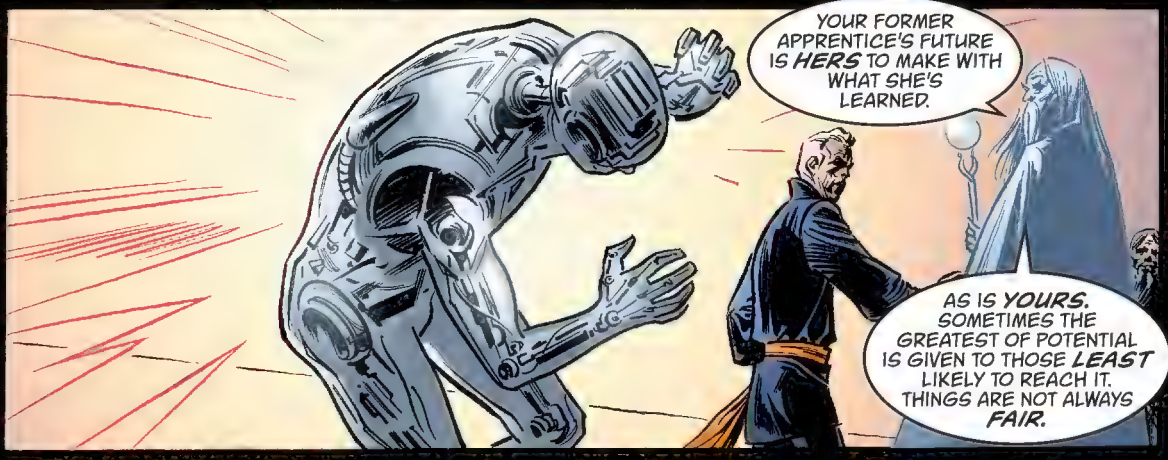
WHEN DID YOU LEARN THAT SORT OF DIPLOMACY?
THE BRIAN I REMEMBER WOULD'VE JUST HIT HIM AND DIED.

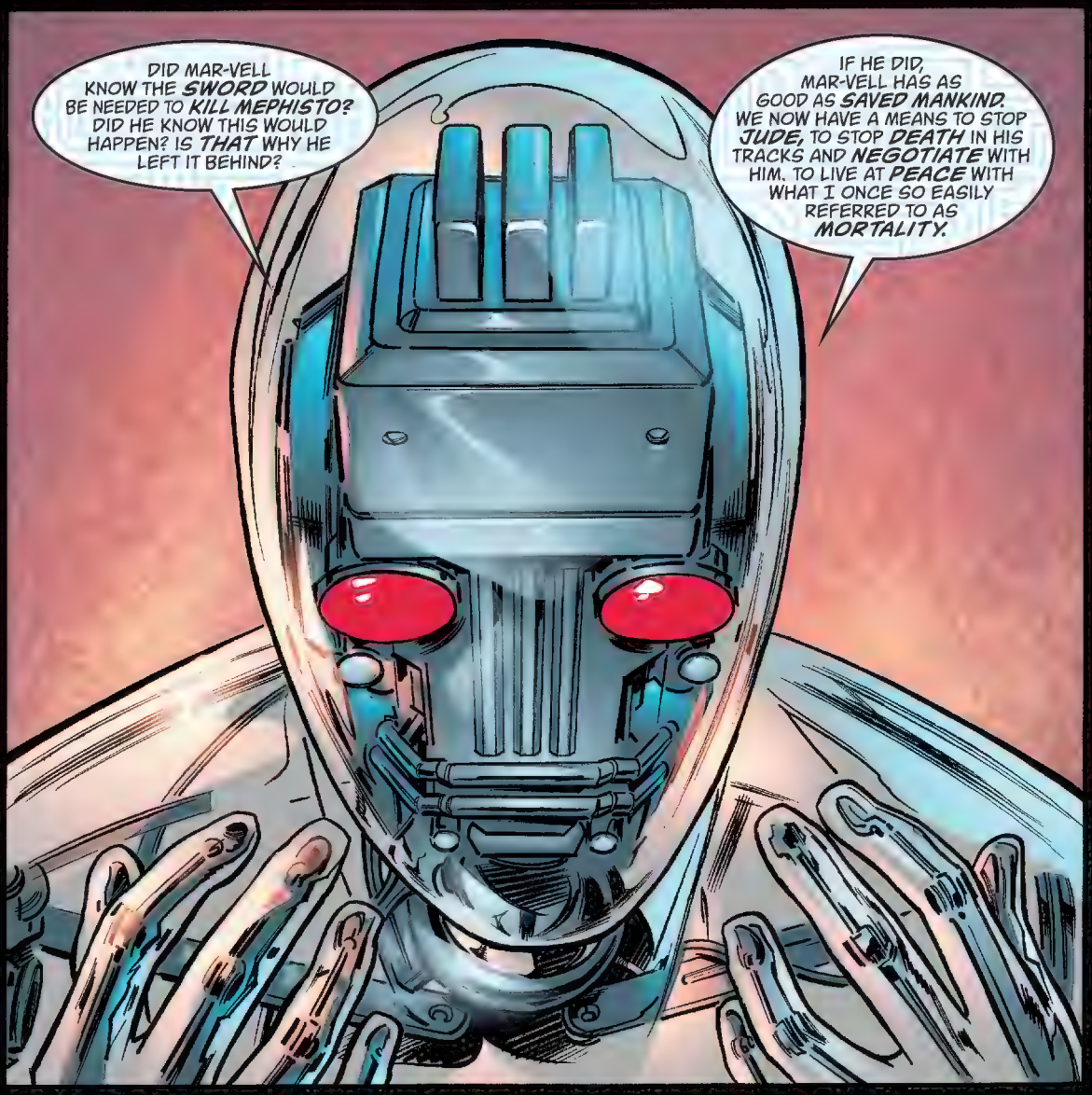
THAT BRIAN DID DIE. HE COULDN'T SURVIVE HERE. NOT IN THIS WORLD.
WELCOME HOME, BETSY.

MERLIN... STRANGE...
STEPHEN WILL BE COMPLETING BETSY'S TRAINING FROM THIS POINT FORWARD. IT IS AGREED.
HE IS IN NEED OF A DISCIPLE. AND A SECOND CHANCE.

NO PLAYING DOCTOR WITH THIS ONE, STRANGE.


THIS HARDLY SEEMS RIGHT, ANCIENT ONE. I FAILED WITH CLEA. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE SHE IS NOW. AND YOU JUST WANT ME TO BEGIN AGAIN?


YOUR FORMER APPRENTICE'S FUTURE IS HERS TO MAKE WITH WHAT SHE'S LEARNED.
AS IS YOURS. SOMETIMES THE GREATEST OF POTENTIAL IS GIVEN TO THOSE LEAST LIKELY TO REACH IT. THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS FAIR.



"OR IS IT SOMETHING ELSE? MAYBE MAR-VELL DIDN'T LEAVE THE SWORD BEHIND FOR US, PER SE, BUT TO GUARANTEE THAT A FORM OF DEATH WOULD STILL EXIST ON EARTH...IF ONLY FOR THE EXPANSION OF PARADISE.

"OR WHAT IF MAR-VELL DIDN'T TAKE THE SWORD BECAUSE IT WOULD BE THE ONLY THING THAT COULD BE USED AGAINST MAR-VELL HIMSELF?

"IF REED DIED IN HIS ATTEMPT TO REACH THE PARADISE, HE MAY ALREADY BE THERE. AND HE MAY BE UNDER MAR-VELL'S CONTROL.

"IF NOT, RICHARDS IS ABOUT TO DISCOVER WHETHER MAR-VELL IS THE ALLY OF MANKIND HE ALWAYS SAID HE WAS.

"OR IF, IN THE END, THE KREE RACE OF WHICH HE WAS A CAPTAIN, AND WHO NOW EXIST AS AN ARMY IN THE LAND OF THE DEAD, HAVEN'T SUCCEEDED BEYOND EVEN THEIR WILDEST IMAGININGS.

"THE MULTI-UNIVERSE MAY NOW BELONG TO THEM."

"Wars are not won by evacuations."
— Winston Churchill

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER TWELVE

WRITTEN BY JIM KRUEGER

JUDE

"Jude."

"Ah. The hopeless one."

"Hopeless one? No. I don't think that's right."

"You are serial model X-51, are you not?"

"Yes. I'm Aaron Stack, the watchman of Earth. I'm a thinking computer that…"

"I am sorry, but I am the Entropic Man, and you have no hope of the blessing I have to give, and therefore you are hopeless. Now ask me what you have come to ask."

"How did you know?"

"There are mysteries, and then there is what is obvious. You have come to ask if you are truly alive."

"… yes."

"No."

"But…. But I believe I am alive. I feel like I'm…"

"You are not determined by sensation, hopeless one, or by the accumulation of knowledge."

"I know… do I have a soul?"

"No."

"Then what am I?"

"You are an appliance. One needed by those I bless, but an appliance all the same."

"Really? First, Uatu, now you… you're killing me, Jude."

"I have told you that I am incapable of such a thing in regards to you. My blessing is mute to one such as you."

"What is your blessing?"

"It has to be experienced to be known."

"And I will never experience…?"

"My blessing? That is correct."

"I have learned that the Elders are trying to recreate the original universe, the one shattered when the Celestials rose to power. Are you an Elder? Are you attempting to help rebuild what was broken?"

"No. The original universe did not want my blessing either."

"What are you saying… that you existed before, or in tandem with them?"

"I do not understand the question. I am. And have continued to be. To place me in a timeline is to so limit the beauty I bring."

"We understand 'entropy' as death and breakdown. Is that how we should understand it?"

"How you understand me is immaterial."

"Is there a different word to understand what and who you are?"

"You don't have a word…"

"What is a better word for death, because that is how we understand you."

"Very well… a closer word would be… mutation."

"Mutation? What you are suggesting, though, is that there is far more to all than what we have learned these past years."

"Did you really believe you could learn it all?"

"While I was at the Watcher's Citadel, I met a 'me' from another reality, one of those other realms manipulated into being by Mephisto. He… I told me that I was merely programmed with Abel Stack, my creator, well… that I was programmed with his personality, his reactions. I cannot choose. I can, at best, only mock his actions and the decisions he would have made had he not died. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"And what of the other me? Now that he is flesh, could he receive your blessing?"

"No. His decision to wear flesh was nothing more than a wire coat hanger's ambition. He is flesh without being. He is... I believe the word for this matter is truly 'dead'."

"But you called me hopeless. How much worse could..."

"He is worse."

"How can he be worse?"

"Entropy is a glorious thing. It is a reconfiguration of substance. Those I touch lose form, only to become something measured by different criteria. Your flesh self will become nothing else, he cannot be reconfigured. He has become tortured mud."

"I don't believe you. That would mean I have no..."

"... hope. Yes, I am sorry that I can not give you transport to the next realm."

"But...?

"What? I call you hopeless in that all you have hoped for was to be human, but that does not mean that your existence does not serve to also bless those who have not tasted of my glory."

"I don't understand."

"Nothing living is meant to remain the same. Yet you do. Because you are not alive, you are far more than a Watchman of Earth. You are the preservation of a time that is at its twilight. Man, the humanity that once existed, will always be represented, because you are here. For all eras to come, for everything that will come after this, you are it...or if you prefer 'he who remains'."

"That was Mephisto. He was 'He Who Remains'."

"Mephisto is dead. But you will continue on, through all the eras to come. Beyond Mephisto's breaks in time. Beyond his manipulations."

"Are there more eras to come, or will the expanding Paradise reach Earth?"

"You will remain even should the Paradise overwhelm humanity."

"Will humanity survive?"

"Humanity no longer exists, Model Number X-51."

"It hurts my feelings that you call me that."

"You've been programmed with delusion, Model Number X-51. It is your manufacturer's ego that speaks now, not your feelings. You are not a watcher, or a watchman or whatever else your father's limited aspirations may have been. Because of you, an aspect of humanity and in fact, all human history, will be saved for all time. You are the depository of all humanity's struggle before the great change."

"The great change? What's going to happen?"

"Something wonderful."

PARADISE X: A

I CREATED THE AVENGERS.
YOU ALL KNOW THIS, DON'T YOU?
EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES WOULD NEVER HAVE EXISTED AT ALL IF IT WEREN'T FOR ME. LITTLE OL' ME.
I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING. I DIDN'T REALLY CREATE THE AVENGERS, I WAS THE ONE THEY GOT TOGETHER TO FIGHT. I WAS THE VILLAIN.
OKAY, THAT'S TRUE. YOU GOT ME. BUT I WAS MANIPULATED TO BE THAT WAY. NURTURE CERTAINLY RULED OVER NATURE IN MY CASE. AND PERHAPS IN ALL OF OURS.
BUT THE POINT IS...IT WAS MY PARTY.
AND IT STILL IS.
I INTEND TO CREATE A NEW TEAM, GENTLEMEN.
A NEW ASSEMBLAGE.

WHICH BRINGS ME TO **YOU** TWO.

THE **BLACK KNIGHT**...SON OF THE INHUMAN KING, BLACK BOLT.

AND YOU, **REJECT**, THE GLORIOUS DESTINY OF THE DEVIANTS PERSONIFIED.

I'D LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR JOINING ME TODAY. FOR HELPING ME REMAKE A REALITY THAT THIS WORLD WAS **NEVER** MEANT TO DO WITHOUT.

THE AVENGERS WERE DEFINED BY **THREE FIGUREHEADS.** ONE, A BEING THAT THOUGHT HE WAS A **GOD.** ANOTHER WAS THE **GREATEST SPECIMEN OF MANKIND** PHYSICALLY POSSIBLE. THE THIRD WAS THE GREATEST ADVANCEMENT OF MAN'S **INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES.**

I THINK WE ALL KNOW WHICH OF THESE THREE **I** AM.

ONE OF THE ORIGINAL AVENGERS WAS **ARMORED.** MORE, HE WAS TONY STARK, A PUBLIC LEADER. HE COULD HAVE BEEN PRESIDENT, HE COULD HAVE TAKEN OVER THE WORLD WITH HIS INTELLIGENCE AND CHARISMATIC ABILITY TO MOVE THE MASSES. HE **CHOSE NOT TO.**

GOT YOU WRITTEN ALL OVER IT, BLACK KNIGHT.

BUT THERE IS A **TEAM** OF AVENGERS. THE **IRON AVENGERS**...

...ARE **ROBOTS.** THEY DO WHAT'S **EXPECTED** OF THEM. THAT'S **NOT** WHAT I WANT.

THE OTHER MEMBER OF THE **"BIG THREE"** WAS THE MOST **PERFECT** HUMAN IMAGINABLE. **STEVE ROGERS** WAS, REGARDLESS OF WHAT HE BELIEVED ABOUT HIMSELF, THE BEST THE RACE COULD BE.

YOU SEE A **PATTERN** HERE, REJECT?

THOR HAS GIVEN UP ON BEING THOR. HE WOULD RATHER BE A **MAN**--A DOCTOR.

STARK **DIED** FACING THE CELESTIALS. AND WE ALL KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO CAPTAIN AMERICA.

IN THEIR ABSENCE, WE CAN ALL BE WHO WE WERE **MEANT** TO BE.

THE ONLY **REAL** QUESTION IS...

...WHO DO WE FIGHT?

WE'RE HERE. BUT THERE'S NO MAR-VELL. NO ALL-KNOWING GOD. SOME REBELLION IN HEAVEN THIS IS.
HE'S HERE, RICK. WE JUST CAN'T SEE HIM. IF ANYTHING, MURDOCK TAUGHT ME THAT...
...OUR EYES JUST NEED TO BE OPENED...
MY OLD ENEMY, AT LAST.
DID WE COME HERE, HUSBAND, ONLY TO BE DAMNED?
NO. I CAME HERE TO DAMN. YOU'VE SAVED ME FROM THAT.
I CAN'T CONTROL THIS MAR-VELL, DAD. HE'S NOT LIKE THE OTHERS.
YOU COULDN'T. HE'S KREE. UNTOUCHED BY THE CELESTIALS. THERE IS NO SEED WITHIN HIM TO CONTROL.
DOES MAR-VELL KNOW, CAP? DOES HE KNOW WHY WE'RE HERE?
HE KNOWS.
HE'S CALLING US.
AND JONES. HE WANTS JONES, TOO.

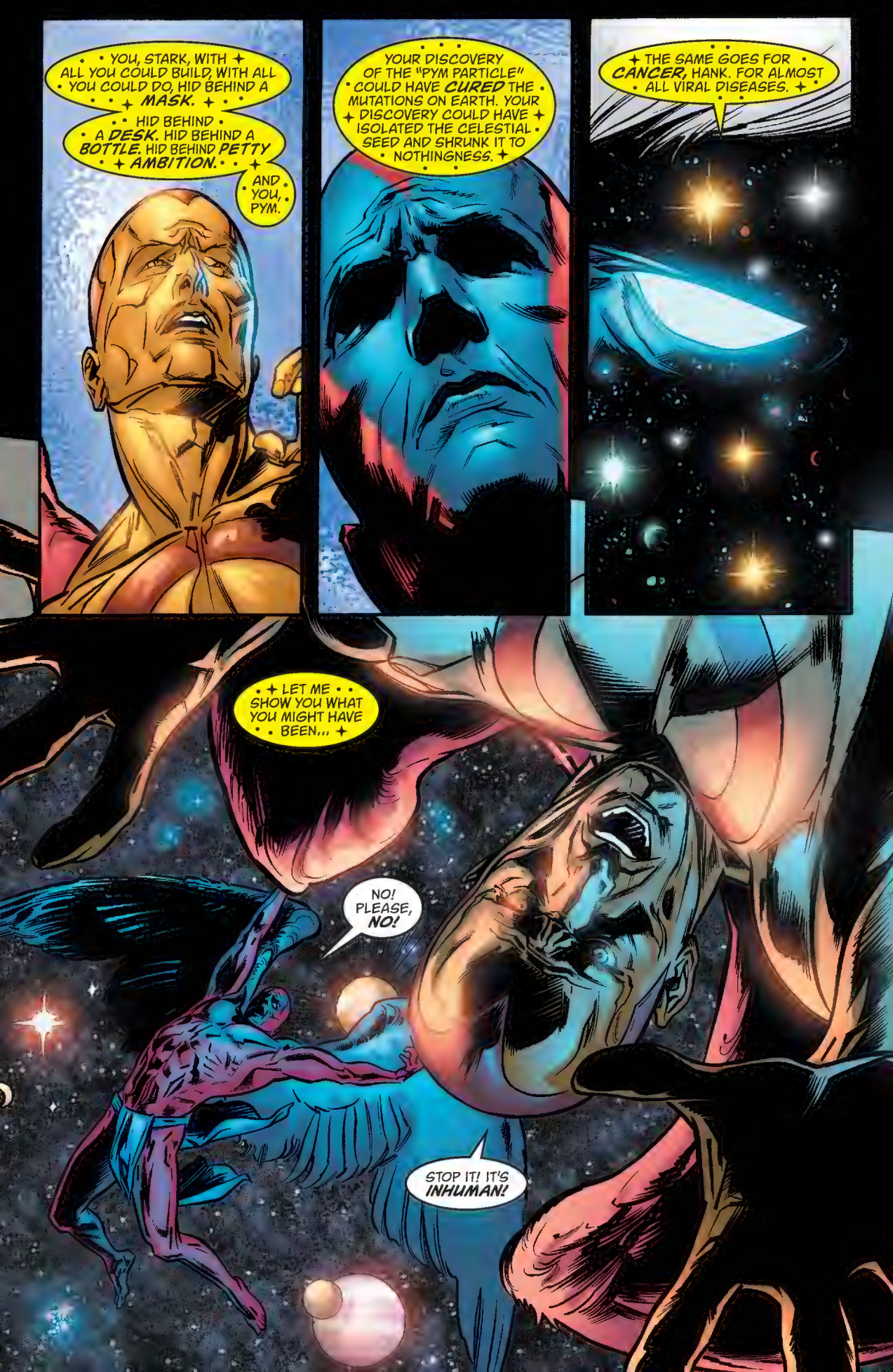
WHY ME? YOU ALL, I UNDERSTAND. BUT I'M NO COSMIC ANGEL.
I DON'T KNOW YOU, RICK. BUT YOU KNEW HIM BETTER THAN WE DID. HE WAS YOUR IDENTITY FOR A LONG TIME.
I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS.
GODSPEED, CAPTAIN AMERICA.
ONCE MORE, INTO THE BREACH.
MARV? IS THAT YOU, MARV?
YOU SEEM SURPRISED TO SEE ME, RICK. DIDN'T YOU WANT TO SEE ME?
MARV? BUT, THIS CAN'T BE...DO YOU HAVE CANCER AGAIN?
STILL, RICK. I HAVE THE BLACK END STILL. IS THIS NOT HOW YOU WANT TO SEE ME?
SURRENDERING TO THE INEVITABLE.
DEFEATED?

I DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS. THIS PARADISE IS ANOTHER PRISON, MARV. THIS HEAVEN YOU BUILT IS LIKE A HELL.
WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?
DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, RICK? DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE BECOME? WHAT ANY OF YOU MIGHT HAVE BECOME?
I MAKE UP PEOPLE. I CAN DRAW THEM OUT OF MY MIND.
SO MUCH MORE, RICK. SO MUCH MORE. YOUR MIND IS ONLY ONE PLACE FROM WHICH YOU GATHER CHAMPIONS...FROM THERE, FROM THE PAST, FROM DEATH'S REALM.
"REALLY, RICK, WITH PEOPLE LIKE McCOY, RICHARDS, BANNER AND PYM, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE NO ONE THOUGHT OF THIS. YOU ARE A LODESTONE FOR HEROISM.
"YOUR CELESTIAL SEED WAS TRIGGERED IN THE SAME BLAST THAT TRANSFORMED BRUCE BANNER. AS IF A TRENCH COULD PROTECT YOU. YOU'VE BEEN A MUTANT ALL ALONG.
"YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO MOVE PEOPLE BOTH PHYSICALLY AND METAPHYSICALLY. WHEN AFFECTED BY YOUR DESIRE, YOU CHOSE TO MAKE THOSE WITH POWER INTO HEROES.
"HOW ELSE COULD YOU EXPLAIN HOW BANNER, HAVING BECOME THE PERSONIFICATION OF THE BOMB, WOULD BECOME A HERO EVEN IN THE FORM OF THE HULK?
"LOKI STILL THINKS HE CREATED THE AVENGERS. BUT HE'S WRONG, RICK. YOU DID.
"YOU DIDN'T ASSEMBLE EARTH'S HEROES TO FIGHT OR TO AVENGE, BUT TO BE UNITED. YOU KNEW EVEN THEN THAT IF THEY WERE NOT TOGETHER, THEIR POWER WOULD CORRUPT THEM. YOU KNEW WHAT POWER DID. AND PERHAPS THIS FEAR IS WHAT KEPT YOU FROM SEEING THE POWER WITHIN YOURSELF."

AND WHAT OF ME, RICK? I WAS A KREE SOLDIER, NO PROTECTOR OF THE UNIVERSE. CONSIDER THE EFFECT YOU HAD UPON ME. NONE OF WHAT I HAVE DONE WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WERE IT NOT FOR YOU.
YOU ARE MORE THE AUTHOR OF THIS PARADISE I HAVE CREATED THAN I AM, RICK. YOU...
I'M SORRY, MRS. RICHARDS. I THINK WE SHOULD CONSIDER SOME SORT OF RETREAT.
SHUT YER YAP, BUCKETHEAD. REED'S COMIN' BACK. HE ALWAYS HAS BEFORE. IF REED SAYS HE'S GOIN' TA MEET WITH MARV, HE WILL. IF ANYTHIN', THEY'RE IN THERE JAWIN' ABOUT THE OLD DAYS.
HECK, HE'S EV'N GOT A REGULAR SUPER MAN THERE TA HELP HIM. AIN'T THAT RIGHT, SQUIRT?
I DON'T KNOW, BEN. I DON'T KNOW MUCH OF ANYTHING ANYMORE. MY OTHER SELF IS SPEAKING, BUT HIS FORM KEEPS CHANGING. I LISTEN, BUT I CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING.
HOW MANY GODS HAS REED FACED OVER THE YEARS? HOW AUDACIOUS TO THINK HE COULD WIN EVERY TIME. HOW WRONG.
THE PARADISE IS ALMOST UPON US...WE NEED TO LEAVE. MY HUSBAND WILL SOMEHOW MEET US THERE.

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, RICHARDS.
OR IF YOU ARE WATCHING THIS, ROBOT. IF YOU CAN'T SEE ME, THIS IS HYPERION.
THE WORLDS SWALLOWED BY THE PARADISE HAVE NOT BEEN DESTROYED.
THEY HAVE NOT BEEN TRANSPORTED TO THIS REALM OF THE DEAD YOU SPEAK OF.
NOR HAVE I.
I HAD BELIEVED THIS TRIP WOULD END IN MY DEATH, ROBOT. I HAD HOPED YOUR WORD WOULD BE KEPT.
BUT LIKE THOSE INHABITANTS OF THE WORLDS WITHIN THE PARADISE, I AM NOT DEAD.
THESE WORLDS HAVE BEEN SHAKEN TO THEIR CORE.
WHAT IS THIS PLACE, RICHARDS?
WHAT WAS IT BEFORE MAR-VELL MADE IT INTO THIS?

CAPTAIN MARVEL? HOW'D HE GET SO BIG?
THIS IS NOT MAR-VELL. THIS IS GENIS. MAR-VELL'S CLONE.
AM I? I SUPPOSE I AM. THE COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS CAN BE A CONFUSING THING FROM TIME TO TIME... OMNISCIENCE IS FLEETING IF YOU CAN'T LOOK EVERYWHERE AT ONCE.
YOU HAVE COME TO JUDGE ME FOR MY SHOW OF POWER, HAVEN'T YOU? IRONIC, ISN'T IT? BECAUSE YOU CAST NO REGRET ON YOUR OWN MISSED OPPORTUNITIES.
YOUR BRAINS ARE VERY SMALL. YOU ARE GENIUSES ON YOUR WORLDS, BUT STILL YOU DO NOT SEE IT IS SIMPLE MATH.
YOU BELIEVE THAT TWO CANNOT BE ONE, AND ONE CANNOT POSSIBLY BE MORE THAN THAT.
AND SO YOU LIMIT YOURSELVES.


YOU, STARK, WITH ALL YOU COULD BUILD, WITH ALL YOU COULD DO, HID BEHIND A MASK.
HID BEHIND A DESK. HID BEHIND A BOTTLE. HID BEHIND PETTY AMBITION.
AND YOU, PYM.
YOUR DISCOVERY OF THE "PYM PARTICLE" COULD HAVE CURED THE MUTATIONS ON EARTH. YOUR DISCOVERY COULD HAVE ISOLATED THE CELESTIAL SEED AND SHRUNK IT TO NOTHINGNESS.
THE SAME GOES FOR CANCER, HANK. FOR ALMOST ALL VIRAL DISEASES.
LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN...
NO! PLEASE, NO!
STOP IT! IT'S INHUMAN!

CAPTAIN MARVEL, MY OLD FRIEND.
HE IS NO FRIEND, KING BOLT. HE IS ONLY A WARDEN IN THIS PLACE.
BOLT?
MARVEL? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
YOU ALONE CALL ME FRIEND.
THIS IS WHAT YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR, ISN'T IT?
EVER SINCE CHRONOS HINTED AT WHAT YOU MIGHT BECOME? EVER SINCE HE GAVE YOU A PIECE OF THE COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND YOU FIRST SAW THE FATE OF MAN.
I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WANTED ME TO DO.
I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE MEANT UNTIL THE CONSCIOUSNESS WAS FULLY ASSEMBLED.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO THE OTHERS?

ONLY SHOWING THEM WHAT THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN. ONLY YOU LIVED PERFECTLY, KING OF THE INHUMANS. THEY DID NOT.
THEY SEE SO EASILY THE GOOD THEY DID, BUT NOT THE GOOD THEY STILL MIGHT HAVE DONE.
THEIR EVIL IS MISSED OPPORTUNITY.
"TO BE WHAT THEY MUST BE, THEY MUST FEEL THE PAIN OF DISCOVERED REGRET.
"THEY MUST TASTE AND FEED UPON THE GOOD THEY MIGHT HAVE DONE, BUT DID NOT."

MY WORLD IS GONE. THIS CANCER HAS ALL BUT CONSUMED IT. EARTH WILL BE NEXT. RICHARDS, MY ENEMY, DIED TRYING TO HELP THIS PLACE. I WILL DO NO LESS FOR YOURS.
I'M SORRY MY HUSBAND COULDN'T SAVE YOUR PEOPLE. THAT'S NOT LIKE HIM.
THEY'RE BACK.
REED SAVES THE WORLD AGAIN.
DO YOU FEEL IT, DAD?
YEAH, HONEY... SOMETHING'S WRONG...
I'M SORRY. WE HAVE TO PREPARE FOR THE WORST.
ANNIHILUS STAYED BEHIND TO CLOSE THE PORTAL, BUT I DON'T THINK IT'S GOING TO MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE.
WE LOST THIS ONE.
I'M LISTENING?

SCOTT, IF YOU CAN HEAR ME...
...REMEMBER THAT I LOVE YOU. I WILL LOVE YOU ALWAYS, EVEN WHEN...
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MAR-VELL? THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE PARADISE.
I KNOW YOU'RE DISAPPOINTED. BUT THAT IS HOW IT IS WITH SOLDIERS. WE ARE SOLDIERS, YOU AND I. WE KNOW ABOUT ORDERS. WE KNOW THE DIFFICULTY OF FOLLOWING BAD ORDERS FROM POOR LEADERS THAT CARE NOTHING FOR US. WE KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO WAIT FOR THE CALL TO SEND IN THE TROOPS...
...WHILE THOSE MOST IN NEED OF HELP ARE SLAUGHTERED.
WE KNOW ABOUT SACRIFICE. WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR VICTORY.
MAR-VELL?
DO NOT TURN AROUND, GREY. THIS IS NOT FOR YOU TO SEE. YOU SEE ME ONE WAY. HE MUST, ANOTHER. I AM NOT THE SAME TO ANYONE WHO SEES ME.

YOU WANT THIS POSITION I HAVE, DON'T YOU, STEVE?
EVER SINCE THE DRAFT BOARD SAID YOU WEREN'T FIT TO FIGHT, AND YOU KNEW IN YOUR HEART THAT YOU WERE, YOU WANTED TO CHOOSE WHO WAS WORTHY.
NO.
BUT FOR ALL THOSE YEARS, YOU KEPT IT HIDDEN. YOU FOUGHT WARS, FOLLOWED ORDERS, ALLOWED YOURSELF TO BE RULED BY THE MAJORITY.
NEVER LISTENING TO YOUR OWN DESIRES, NEVER GIVING VOICE TO YOUR OWN INDIVIDUALITY.
NO.
YOU WATCHED AS LESSER MEN LED MILLIONS TO RUIN. AND YOU TOOK YOUR ORDERS, LETTING THEM CONTINUE.
YOU CAN HAVE MY POWER NOW, STEVE. IT'S YOURS FOR THE ASKING. YOU CAN RULE PARADISE IF YOU WANT. JUST ASK.
NEVER!

I JUST CAN'T WAIT ANYMORE. MAR-VELL COULD BE TORTURING THEM, AND WE WAIT TO WITNESS THE WHOLE THING.
I HAVE MY OWN ARROW.
YOU SHAME ME WITH YOUR COURAGE, MARKSMAN.
YEAH, SURE.
WHAT'S HAPPENING, DAD?
IT'S SLIPPING...
PULL. MAYBE WHATEVER'S SLIPPING, WE CAN PULL OUT.

THAT'S IT. PULL... PULL...
WHAT IS IT?
DON'T YOU SEE?
IT'S THEM. OUR GUARDIAN ANGELS. WHAT'S LEFT OF THE AVENGING HOST.
IT'S STEVE... I THINK I KILLED STEVE.

"Ethan got knocked down. When he stood up again, his mouth was full of dirt, and he had taken a knee to the eye, and his nose was bleeding. But he was still holding onto the ball."
— *Michael Chabon, SUMMERLAND*

PARADISE X X

"SUSAN, MY DARLING. THE PLACE I GO NOW CANNOT BE HEAVEN. NOT IN ANY REAL SENSE OF THE WORD.
"I KNOW THIS BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT HERE WITH ME.
"THIS IS MAR-VELL'S PARADISE. WE HAD BELIEVED THIS TO BE A PLACE HEROES GO WHEN THEY DIE. IN THE ABSENCE OF A TRUE VALHALLA, MAR-VELL BUILT ONE. WE EVEN HELPED HIM DEFEAT DEATH TO CREATE A WAY FOR HIM TO BUILD THIS PLACE.
"I HAD THOUGHT THAT SOMEHOW OUR BELIEF SYSTEMS HAD IMPACTED MAR-VELL DURING HIS TIME ON EARTH, THAT OUR MYTHS AND HOPES OF AN AFTERLIFE HAD SOMEHOW CHANGED HIS KREE BELIEF SYSTEM. THAT HE'D ADOPTED SOMETHING OF HUMAN FAITH.
"BUT IT SEEMS INSTEAD THAT THIS PARADISE WAS A KREE TRAP FOR EARTH'S HEROES, A SNARE DESIGNED WITH OUR HOPES IN AN AFTERLIFE AS THE CARROT.
"IN A STRUGGLE BETWEEN GODS, MONSTERS AND MUTANTS, HUMANITY WON. BUT NOT EARTH'S HUMANITY."

"HOW COULD I HAVE MISSED THIS?
"HE'S BEEN WATCHING US ALL THE TIME.
"I'M IN WAY OVER MY HEAD, SUSAN. YOU WERE WRONG. YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE ME HERE."
RICHARDS...
ANOTHER ONE.
SHOOT HIM.
ZARDA...
SHOOT ME?
YOUR GUNS DIDN'T HAVE ANY EFFECT ON ME WHEN I WAS ALIVE. WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THEY WILL NOW?

REALLY...
...IT DOESN'T EVEN MATTER WHETHER I HAVE BULLET-PROOF SKIN OR NOT.
I'M COMING, ZARDA! I'M COMING!

I'M SO GLAD YOU CAME, REED. I KNEW YOU WOULD.
MAR-VELL?
HYPERION KNOWS HE'S DEAD, REED. HE KNOWS HE'S TRANSFORMED INTO A CITIZEN OF THIS WORLD. X-51 KEPT HIS FINAL PROMISE OF DEATH TO YOUR WORLD'S SUPER MAN.
HAS ALL THIS BEEN FOR NOTHING, MAR-VELL? I THOUGHT YOU ADOPTED EARTH AND ITS PEOPLE AS YOUR OWN.
I'M GOING TO FIGHT YOU ON THIS.
THAT'S THE PROBLEM, REED. EVEN YOU.
EVEN... YOU.
EVEN ME, WHAT?

"LOOK TO EARTH, REED, AND TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE."
"JUDE IS THERE. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY NO ONE IS RUNNING FROM HIM, THOUGH. HE'S PERSONIFIED ENTROPY, BUT PEOPLE SEEM TO BE BRINGING THE SICK TO HIM.
"I SEE UATU. THE OLD WATCHER. HE LOOKS TERRIBLE."
HERE HE IS, JUDE. THANK YOU.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE WORLD'S GOING TO BE LIKE WITHOUT YOU, UATU.
YOU'LL SEE AGAIN, SOON. IN A PLACE, I HOPE, WHERE YOU'LL SEE MORE THAN YOU EVER HOPED WAS THERE.
GOOD-BYE.
"I DON'T UNDERSTAND, MAR-VELL. THAT'S KLAW. BUT HE DOES NOT LOOK LIKE HE SHOULD BE DEAD. HE LOOKS VERY MUCH ALIVE. WHY IS HE BEING BROUGHT BEFORE JUDE?"
"IRONIC, ISN'T IT, REED RICHARDS, THAT YOU OF ALL PEOPLE SHOULD WITNESS THE FATE OF THE MASTER OF VIBRANIUM?
"KLAW IS NOT BEING GIVEN TO JUDE, REED. HE'S BEING GIVEN TO KURT WAGNER... BELASCO."
WHY?
"JUDE WAS CORRECT. HIS TOUCH WAS A GIFT. ONE YOUR FELLOW MAN BELIEVES KLAW IS NOT WORTH RECEIVING.
"THE ILL THAT SHOULD HAVE DIED ARE BROUGHT TO THIS ISLAND TO BE TOUCHED BY JUDE, REED. SO THAT THEY MAY ONE DAY REACH THIS PLACE."

"IT'S INHUMAN. WHO ARE WE TO DECIDE..."
"OTHERS, LIKE KLAW, ARE BROUGHT HERE TO LIMBO. I TOLD STEVE ROGERS ONCE THAT THIS PLACE WOULD BE HELL.
"AND IN THIS SMALL WAY, KURT WAGNER BELIEVES THAT HE STILL SERVES HEAVEN."
BUT THIS ISN'T HEAVEN, MAR-VELL. IT'S A LIE. IT'S DESTROYING PEOPLE'S LIVES. IT WAS A BID FOR YOUR RACE TO GAIN CONTROL OF THE UNIVERSE. IT WAS A...
DO YOU EVER GET TIRED OF HEARING YOURSELF SPEAK, REED? I KNOW SUSAN DOES.
THE CELESTIAL THAT ONCE GREW WITHIN THE CORE OF EARTH. WHEN YOU CALLED YOUR SON TO CONSUME IT, YOU KNEW WHAT YOU WERE DOING. YOU MADE A CHOICE. LIKE ALL YOUR RACE DOES. WHO LIVES? WHO DIES?
YOUR RACE HAS ALWAYS MADE THAT DECISION.
BUT NOT JUST YOUR PEOPLE, REED. MINE AS WELL.
IF YOUR HATRED AND HOSTILITY CAN BE TRACED TO THE CELESTIAL MANIPULATION OF YOUR SPECIES, WHY DID IT ALSO EXIST IN THE KREE, AN UN-MANIPULATED SPECIES?
WHY ARE WE SO AGGRESSIVE THAT GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO REACH A PARADISE WE NEVER BELIEVED IN, WE INSTANTLY CLAIM IT AS A COLONY?
"MY PEOPLE'S WARS AND WANTS NEVER END, REED. NEITHER DO YOURS."

EVEN AFTER HAVING BEEN DEAD, THE KINGPIN SEEKS HIS OLD POWER--
--SEEKS TO MANIPULATE THOSE AROUND HIM. HE'S ABOUT TO LEARN A TERRIBLE LESSON.
WHY HAVE YOU COME HERE, MURDOCK? YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO ME. I REJECTED WHAT YOU HAD TO OFFER.
YOUR GUNS HAVE NO POWER HERE.
I'M NOT HERE FOR YOU, KINGPIN...
...YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE. WE'RE HERE FOR VANESSA, YOUR WIFE.
SHE SHOULD GET HER CHANCE FOR HEAVEN.
ME?
YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU, WILSON. YOU KNOW I DO. BUT YOU SCARE ME SO...

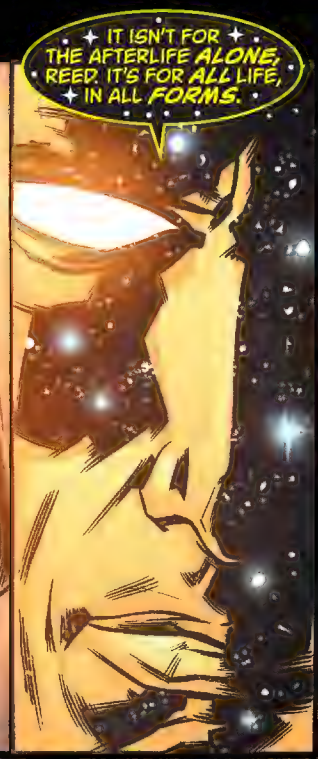
I DON'T KNOW WHY, BUT I SEEM TO REMEMBER YOU...
...I FEEL LIKE YOU'RE A KIND MAN...A GOOD MAN.
NOOOOO!
THERE ISN'T A PERSON YOU CONTROL IN THIS REALM OF THE DEAD THAT I CAN'T TAKE AWAY FROM YOU, WILSON. YOU HAVE NO POWER HERE.

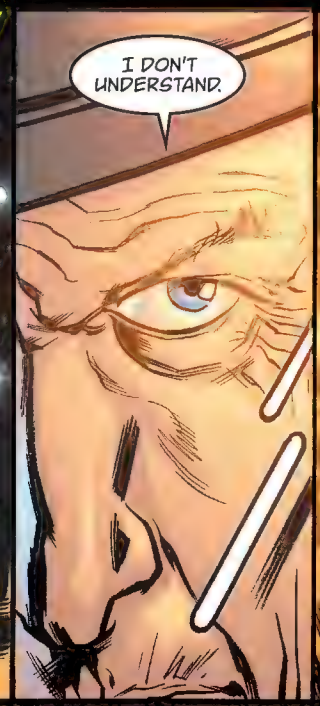
MURDOCK'S GOING TO STAY HERE, IN THIS PURGATORY, IF ONLY TO MAKE CERTAIN THE PEOPLE OF HELL'S KITCHEN HAVE A CHANCE AT THE HEAVEN THAT'S BEING BUILT, IF ONLY TO PROTECT THEM FROM WILSON FISK.
THE AVENGING HOST IS GOING TO NEED A NEW MEMBER.
CAP?
FREE THE OTHERS, RICK.
ASSEMBLE THEM. THAT'S WHAT YOU DO.

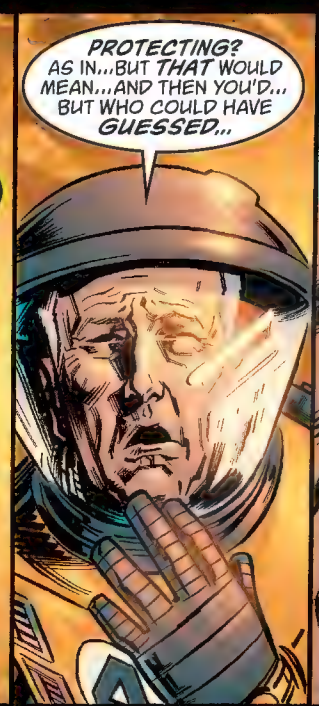
WHY ARE YOU SHOWING ME ALL OF THIS? EARTH...DEATH'S REALM...THIS RIDICULOUS BATTLE IN YOUR PARADISE?
AH, THERE IS THE REED RICHARDS I KNOW. IT IS RIDICULOUS, ISN'T IT?
DEATH HAS NO POWER HERE. AND FOR ALL THOSE THAT HAD THEIR DREAMS COME TRUE, THEY FOUND THEMSELVES DAMNED BY THE LIMITATIONS OF THEIR HUNGERS.
EVEN YOU SAID, REED, THAT YOU WOULD FIGHT ME. DON'T YOU SEE?
"IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY REAL GOOD OR EVIL, IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY REAL HOPE FOR THIS HEAVEN, WHY FIGHT AT ALL?"
AND YET WE DO. JUST IN CASE WE'RE WRONG. WE ARE OUTRAGED AT EVIL AND UNMOVED BY THE APPEARANCE OF GOOD.
IT WOULD HAVE GONE ON FOREVER IF I HADN'T STOPPED IT.
"SO ETERNITY IS DEAD, JUST LIKE WE'D HEARD."
"NOT YET. BUT SOON, RELATIVELY SPEAKING. THE OLD ETERNITY AT LEAST. THE ONE THAT SURVIVED WHAT WAS BEFORE THIS UNIVERSE AND KEPT TRYING TO BRING IT BACK AGAIN."
ARE YOU BECOMING THE NEW ETERNITY?
NO, REED, MY OLD FRIEND.
YOU ARE.

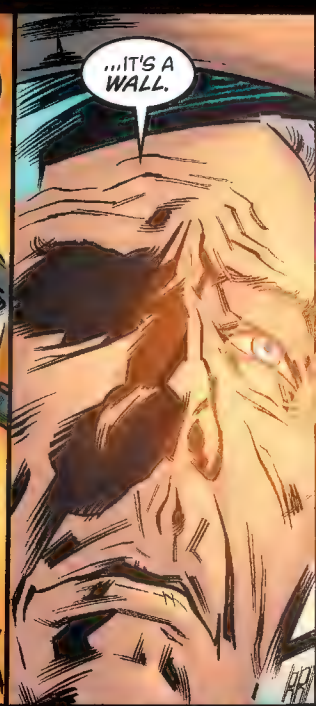
"LOOK AT THEM, REED. STILL CONTROLLED BY THE HOSTILITIES THAT GREW LIKE BOILS OUT OF THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE CELESTIALS AND THE ELDERS. FIGHTING WARS THAT HAVE ALL THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DUST BEING BLOWN ACROSS AN ANCIENT STAGE.

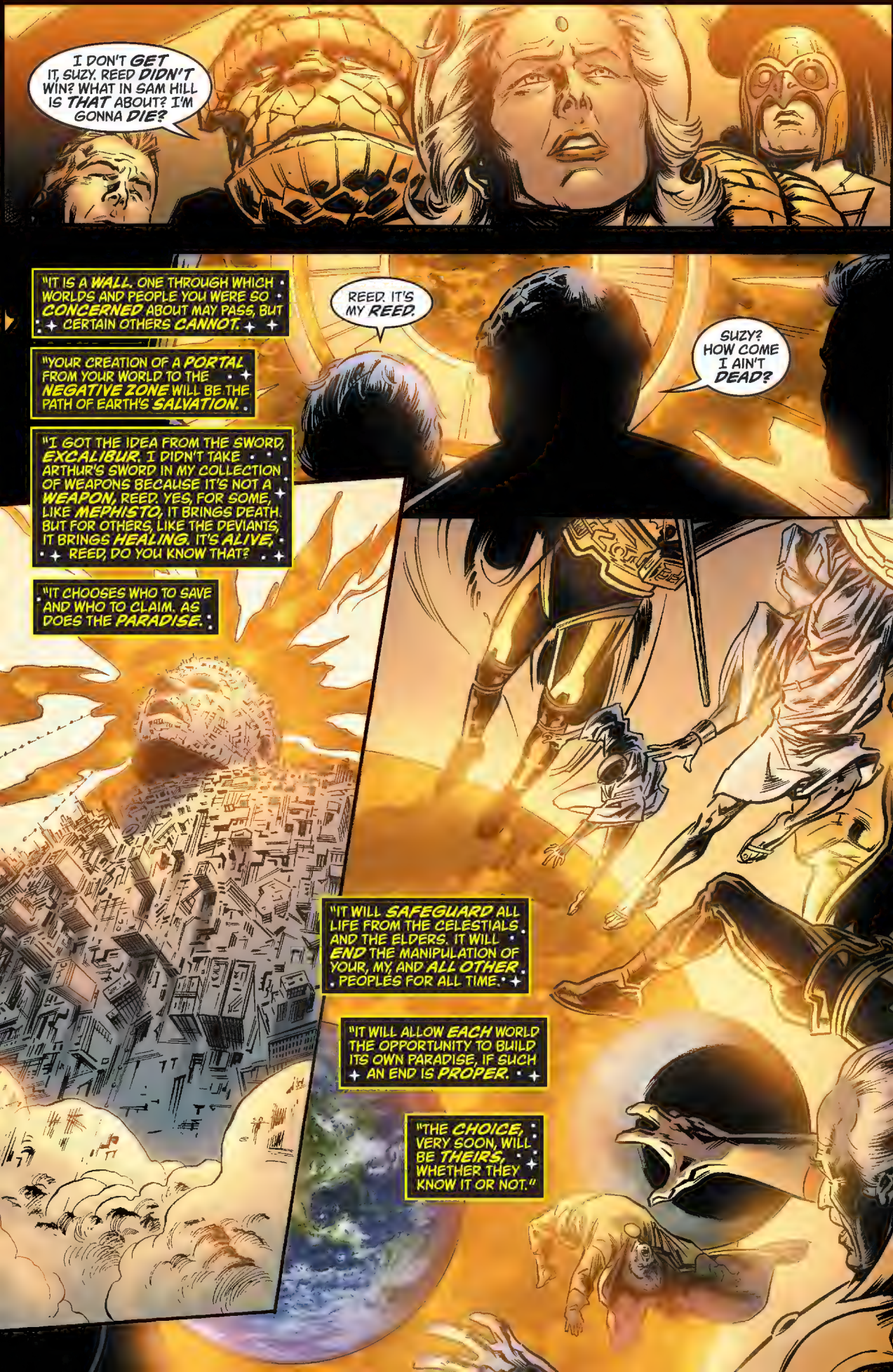
"THE PARADISE IS THE THIRD WAY, REED."

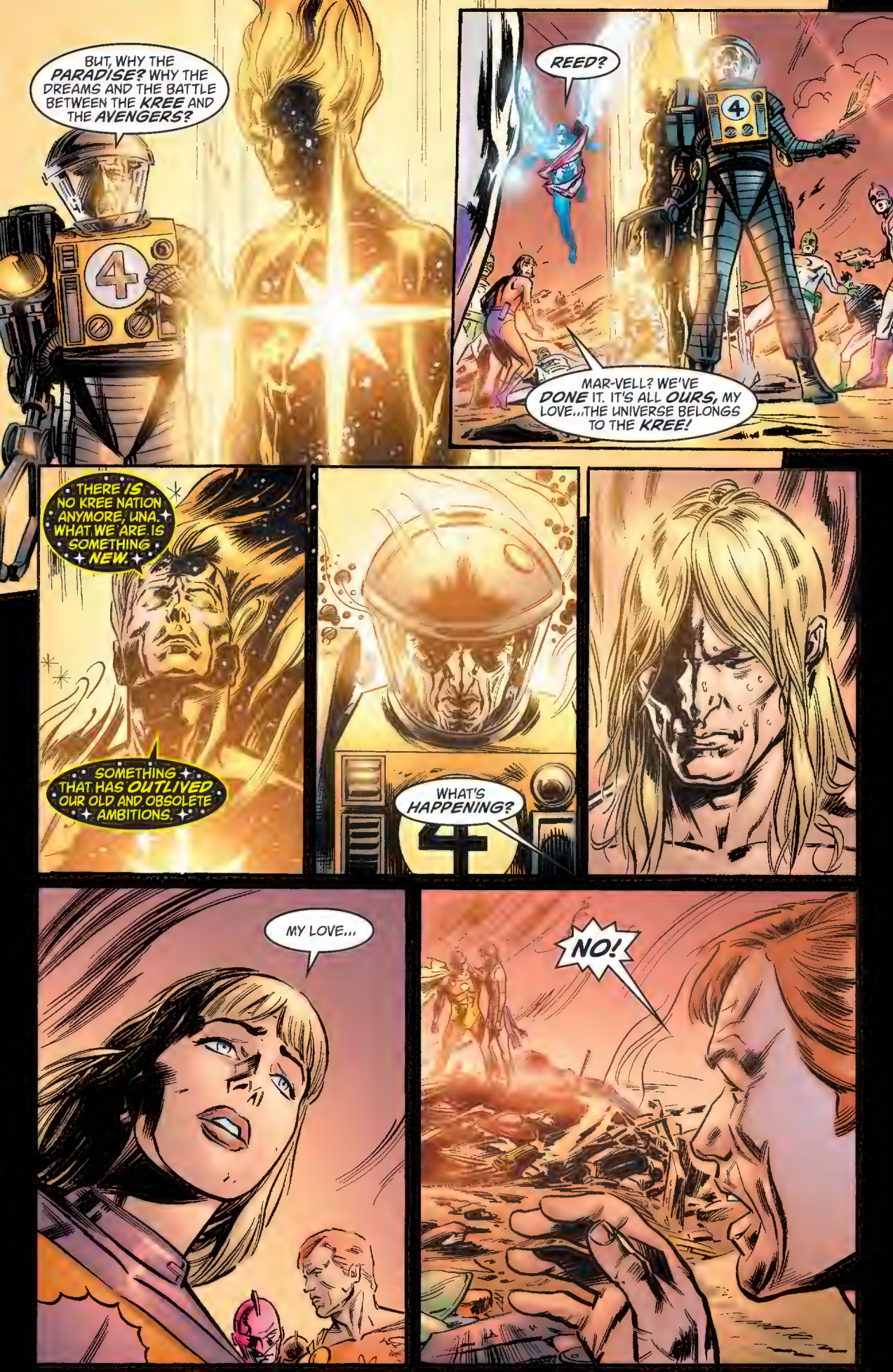




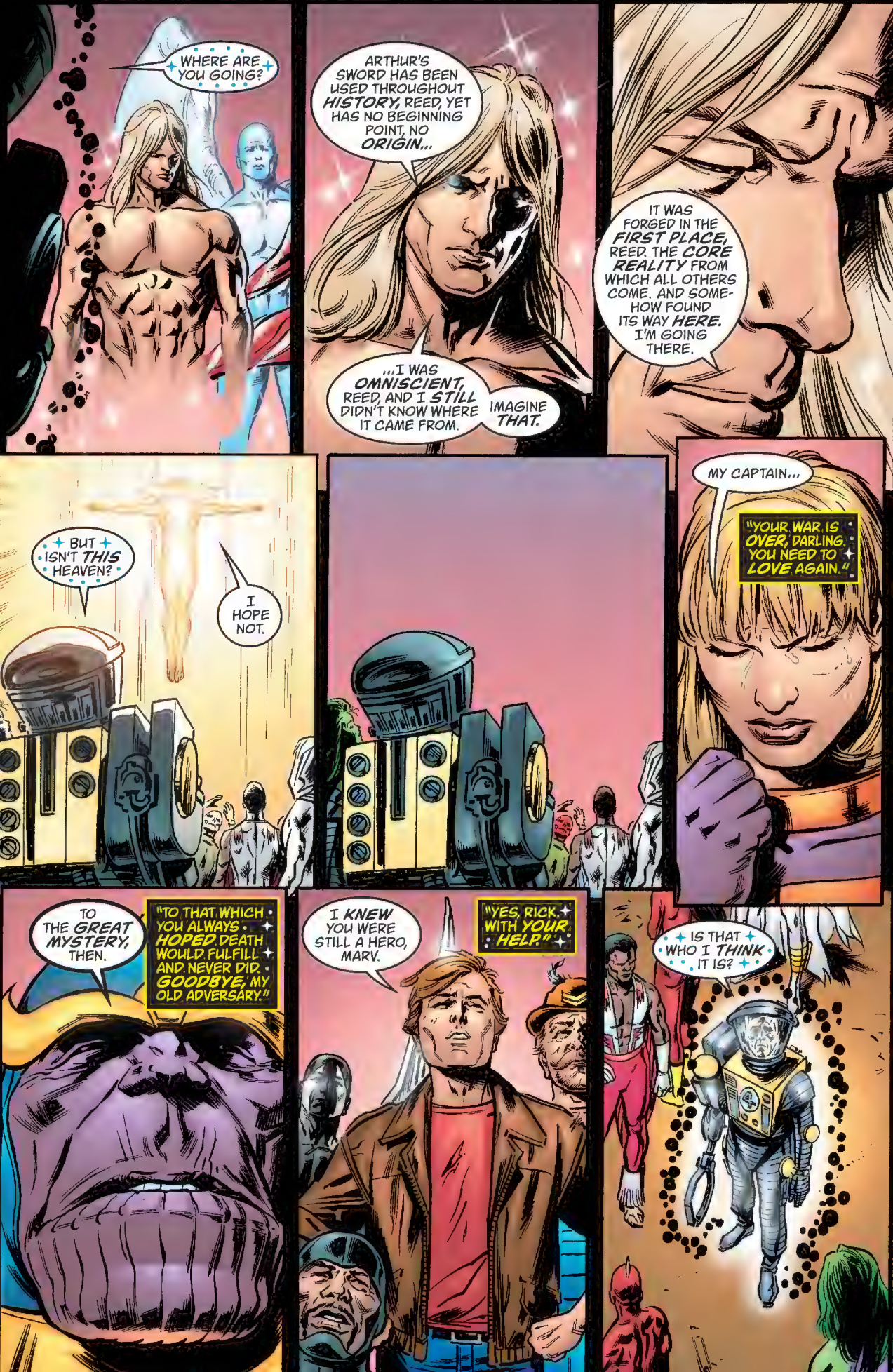




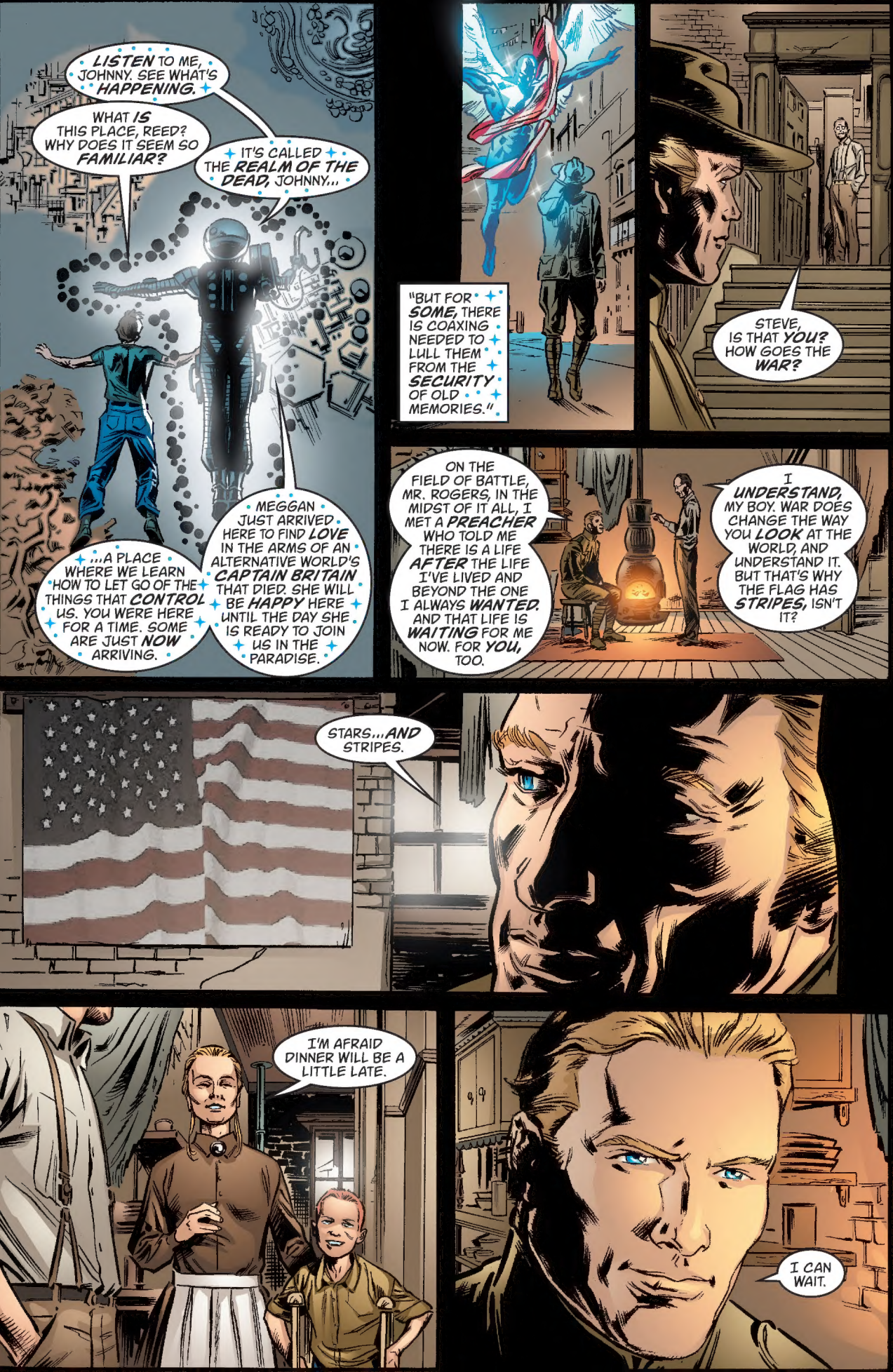

I DON'T GET IT, SUZY. REED DIDN'T WIN? WHAT IN SAM HILL IS THAT ABOUT? I'M GONNA DIE?
"IT IS A WALL. ONE THROUGH WHICH WORLDS AND PEOPLE YOU WERE SO CONCERNED ABOUT MAY PASS, BUT CERTAIN OTHERS CANNOT.
"YOUR CREATION OF A PORTAL FROM YOUR WORLD TO THE NEGATIVE ZONE WILL BE THE PATH OF EARTH'S SALVATION.
"I GOT THE IDEA FROM THE SWORD, EXCALIBUR. I DIDN'T TAKE ARTHUR'S SWORD IN MY COLLECTION OF WEAPONS BECAUSE IT'S NOT A WEAPON, REED. YES, FOR SOME, LIKE MEPHISTO, IT BRINGS DEATH. BUT FOR OTHERS, LIKE THE DEVIANTS, IT BRINGS HEALING. IT'S ALIVE, REED, DO YOU KNOW THAT?
"IT CHOOSES WHO TO SAVE AND WHO TO CLAIM. AS DOES THE PARADISE.
REED. IT'S MY REED.
SUZY? HOW COME I AIN'T DEAD?
"IT WILL SAFEGUARD ALL LIFE FROM THE CELESTIALS AND THE ELDERS. IT WILL END THE MANIPULATION OF YOUR, MY, AND ALL OTHER PEOPLES FOR ALL TIME.
"IT WILL ALLOW EACH WORLD THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ITS OWN PARADISE, IF SUCH AN END IS PROPER.
"THE CHOICE, VERY SOON, WILL BE THEIRS, WHETHER THEY KNOW IT OR NOT."

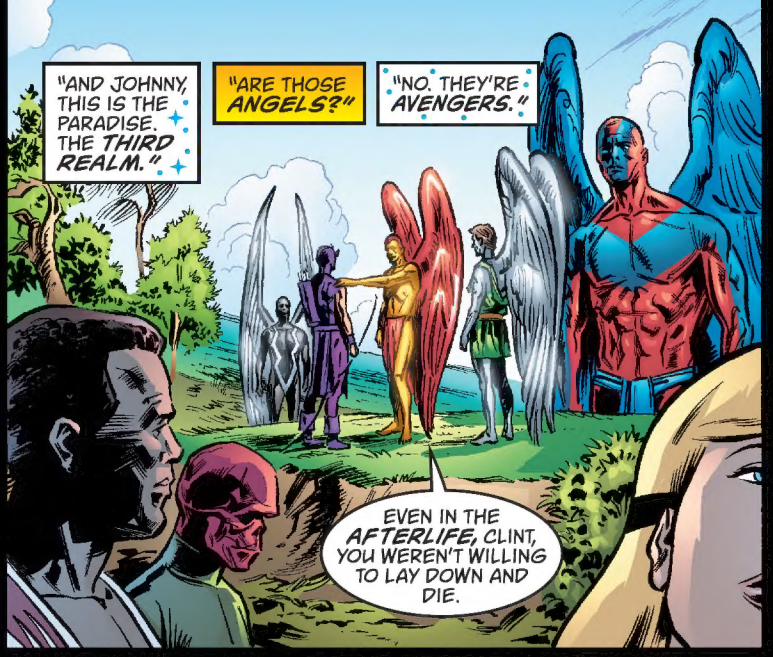

BUT, WHY THE PARADISE? WHY THE DREAMS AND THE BATTLE BETWEEN THE KREE AND THE AVENGERS?
REED?
MAR-VELL? WE'VE DONE IT. IT'S ALL OURS, MY LOVE...THE UNIVERSE BELONGS TO THE KREE!
THERE IS NO KREE NATION ANYMORE, UNA. WHAT WE ARE IS SOMETHING NEW.
SOMETHING THAT HAS OUTLIVED OUR OLD AND OBSOLETE AMBITIONS.
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
MY LOVE...
NO!

DON'T, PLEASE, DON'T... I LOVE HIM!
DON'T CALL HIM YOUR LOVE! HE'S THE ENEMY!!
YOU NEED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS, REED. YOU'RE OMNISCIENT NOW. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS THINK ABOUT THEM, AND YOU'LL KNOW THE PERFECT ANSWER. YOU COULD STOP THIS...
I'M NOT CERTAIN IF I CAN CALL THAT THINKING, MAR-VELL. PERHAPS THE PERFECT ANSWER IS NOT FITTING FOR AN IMPERFECT PEOPLE.
I KNOW YOU THINK HE'S A SPY FOR THE ELDERS. HE'S NOT, NOT ANYMORE. HE LOVES ME. I LOVE HIM.
BUT I DIED! I CAME HERE TO SAVE YOU.
I'M SORRY.
TEACH THEM HOW TO HAVE NEW THOUGHTS. THAT'S WHAT YOU DO.
AND STEVE, MAKE CERTAIN REED DOESN'T TURN THE PARADISE INTO A DEMOCRACY. HEAVEN HAS TO BE BETTER THAN THE OPINION OF THE COMMON DENOMINATOR.


WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
ARTHUR'S SWORD HAS BEEN USED THROUGHOUT HISTORY, REED, YET HAS NO BEGINNING POINT, NO ORIGIN...
...I WAS OMNISCIENT, REED, AND I STILL DIDN'T KNOW WHERE IT CAME FROM.
IMAGINE THAT.
IT WAS FORGED IN THE FIRST PLACE, REED. THE CORE REALITY FROM WHICH ALL OTHERS COME. AND SOMEHOW FOUND ITS WAY HERE. I'M GOING THERE.
BUT ISN'T THIS HEAVEN?
I HOPE NOT.
MY CAPTAIN...
"YOUR WAR IS OVER, DARLING. YOU NEED TO LOVE AGAIN."
TO THE GREAT MYSTERY, THEN.
"TO THAT WHICH YOU ALWAYS HOPED DEATH WOULD FULFILL AND NEVER DID. GOODBYE, MY OLD ADVERSARY."
I KNEW YOU WERE STILL A HERO, MARV.
"YES, RICK. WITH YOUR HELP."
IS THAT WHO I THINK IT IS?

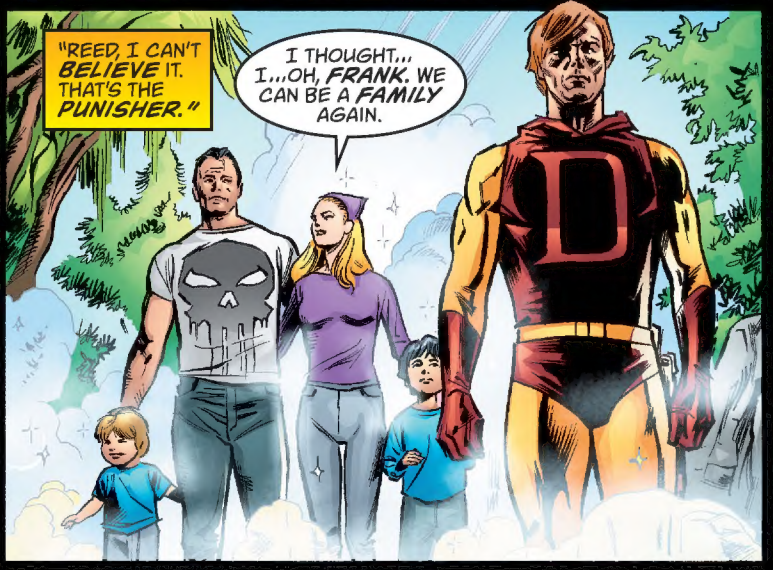
MY NAME IS JOHNNY. JOHNNY STORM. AND I'M FREE.
I DON'T HAVE TO SAVE THE WORLD. I NEVER DID.
IT CAN GO TO HELL WITHOUT ME, AND I DON'T CARE. I HAVE BEER. AND I HAVE GIRLS. WHAT ELSE IS THERE?
DARN, IT'S WARM. WHERE'S BOBBY DRAKE WHEN YOU NEED HIM? OH YEAH...
ANYHOW, LIKE I WAS SAYING...
...WHAT WAS I SAYING?
NO SISTERS... NO BEN GRIMM... AND NO REED RICHARDS...
NOT EVEN OL' PROFESSOR STRETCH-ARM STRING-BEAN CAN REACH ME HERE.
OH...REED... GOOD, YOU'RE HERE. I WAS WONDERING WHEN YOU'D SHOW UP.
4
DO WE GOTSTA SAVE THE WORLD AGAIN? 'CAUSE I DON'T WANNA. I GOT A LIFE HERE. I'M HA...I'M HAPPY.
TIME TO GROW UP, JOHNNY.


LISTEN TO ME, JOHNNY. SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING.
WHAT IS THIS PLACE, REED? WHY DOES IT SEEM SO FAMILIAR?
IT'S CALLED THE REALM OF THE DEAD, JOHNNY...
...A PLACE WHERE WE LEARN HOW TO LET GO OF THE THINGS THAT CONTROL US. YOU WERE HERE FOR A TIME. SOME ARE JUST NOW ARRIVING.
MEGGAN JUST ARRIVED HERE TO FIND LOVE IN THE ARMS OF AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD'S CAPTAIN BRITAIN THAT DIED. SHE WILL BE HAPPY HERE UNTIL THE DAY SHE IS READY TO JOIN US IN THE PARADISE.
"BUT FOR SOME, THERE IS COAXING NEEDED TO LULL THEM FROM THE SECURITY OF OLD MEMORIES."
STEVE, IS THAT YOU? HOW GOES THE WAR?
ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE, MR. ROGERS, IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL, I MET A PREACHER WHO TOLD ME THERE IS A LIFE AFTER THE LIFE I'VE LIVED AND BEYOND THE ONE I ALWAYS WANTED. AND THAT LIFE IS WAITING FOR ME NOW. FOR YOU, TOO.
I UNDERSTAND, MY BOY. WAR DOES CHANGE THE WAY YOU LOOK AT THE WORLD, AND UNDERSTAND IT. BUT THAT'S WHY THE FLAG HAS STRIPES, ISN'T IT?
STARS...AND STRIPES.
I'M AFRAID DINNER WILL BE A LITTLE LATE.
I CAN WAIT.

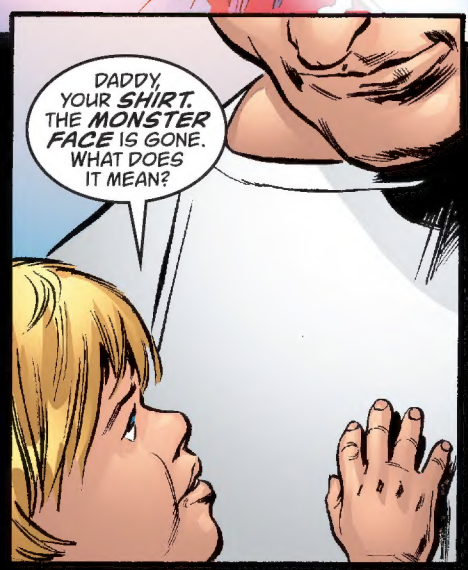

"AND JOHNNY, THIS IS THE PARADISE. THE THIRD REALM."
"ARE THOSE ANGELS?"
"NO. THEY'RE AVENGERS."
EVEN IN THE AFTERLIFE, CLINT, YOU WEREN'T WILLING TO LAY DOWN AND DIE.

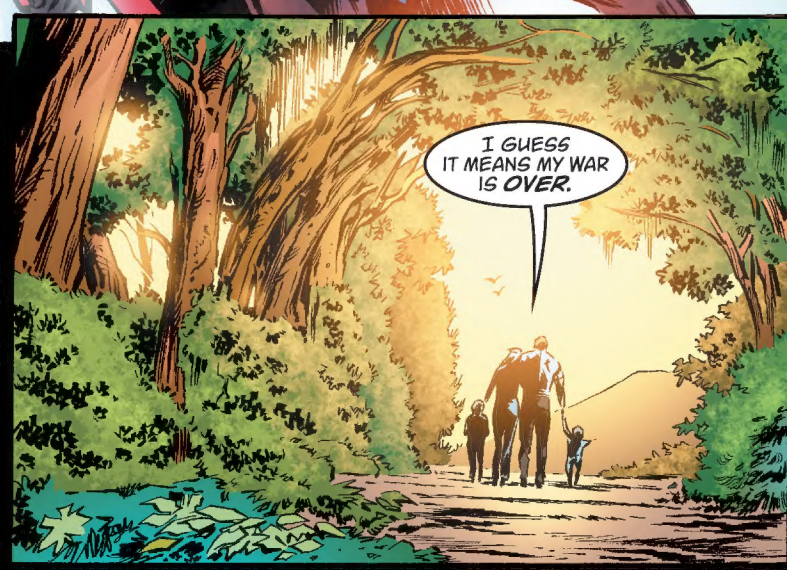
WE NEED YOU, CLINT. WE NEED YOUR HELP.

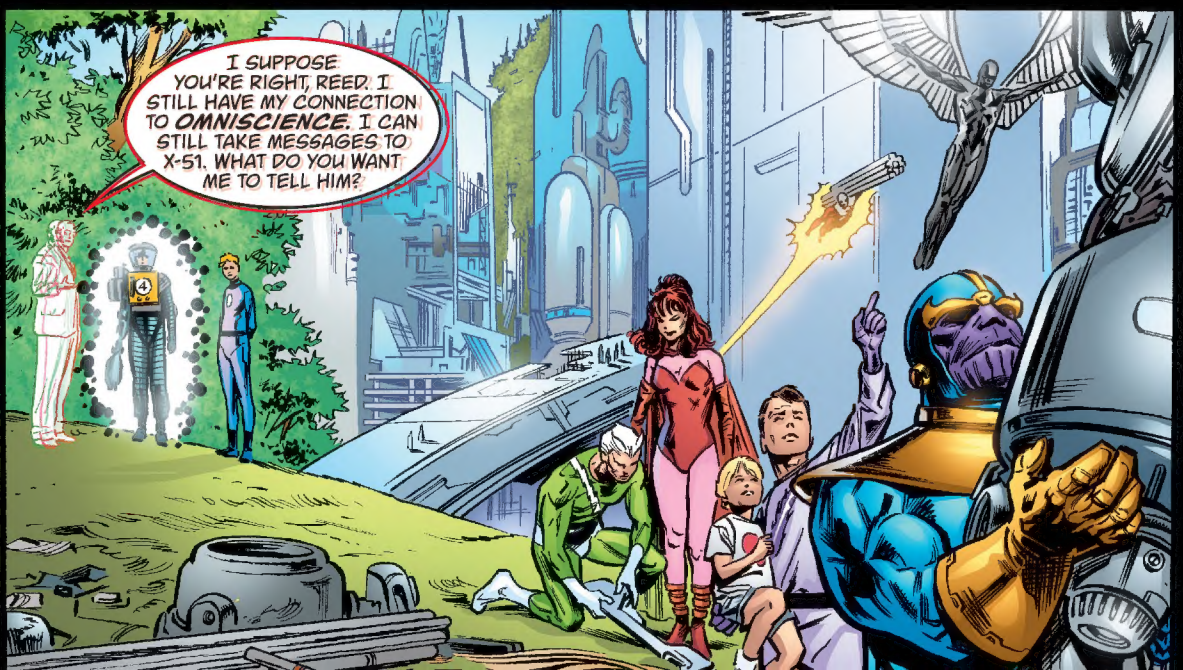
WELCOME TO THE AVENGING HOST.


"REED, I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THAT'S THE PUNISHER."
I THOUGHT... I...OH, FRANK. WE CAN BE A FAMILY AGAIN.

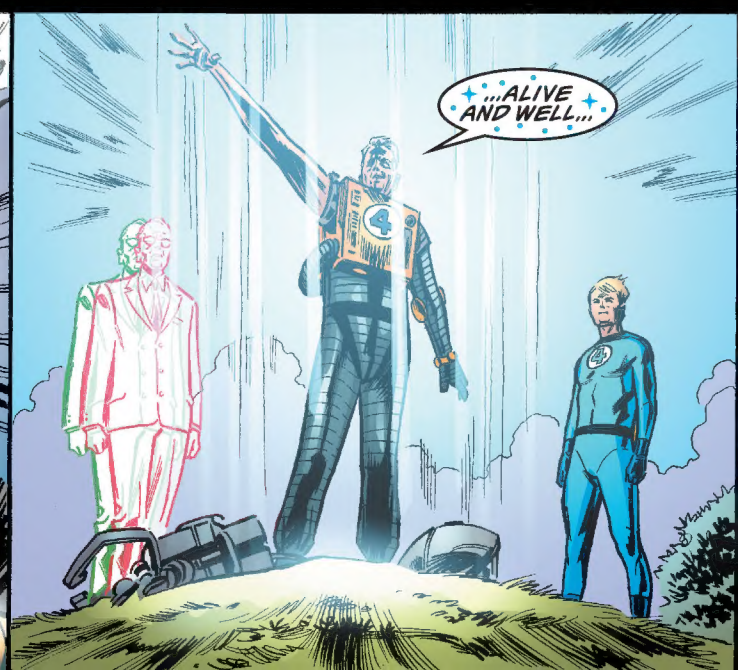
YEAH... FOREVER THIS TIME.

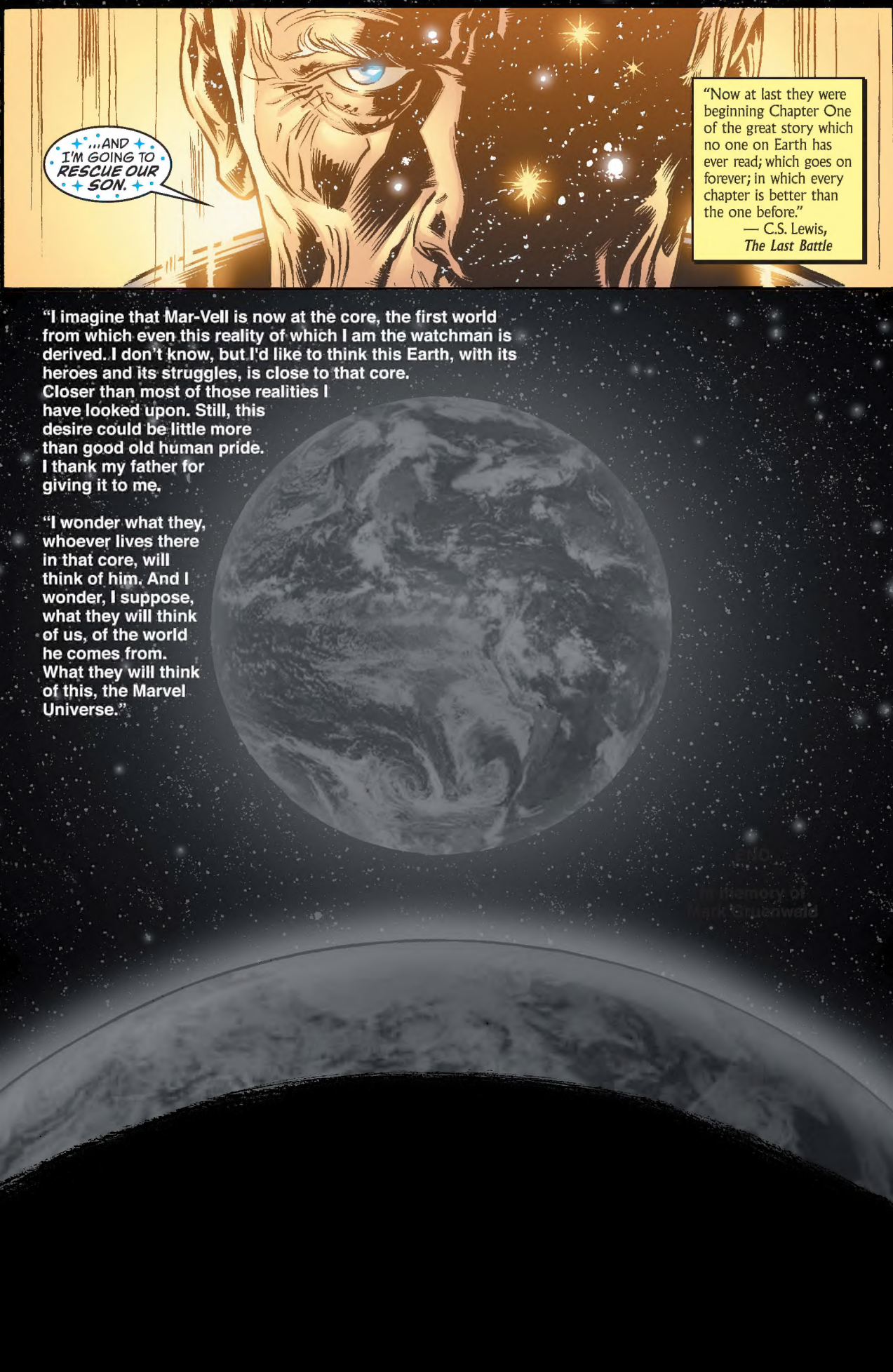

DADDY, YOUR SHIRT. THE MONSTER FACE IS GONE. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?


I GUESS IT MEANS MY WAR IS OVER.


I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT, REED. I STILL HAVE MY CONNECTION TO OMNISCIENCE. I CAN STILL TAKE MESSAGES TO X-51. WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO TELL HIM?

GO TO SUSAN FIRST. TALK TO MY WIFE. LET HER KNOW I'M...


...ALIVE AND WELL...


...AND I'M GOING TO RESCUE OUR SON.
"Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the great story which no one on Earth has ever read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."
— C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*
"I imagine that Mar-Vell is now at the core, the first world from which even this reality of which I am the watchman is derived. I don't know, but I'd like to think this Earth, with its heroes and its struggles, is close to that core. Closer than most of those realities I have looked upon. Still, this desire could be little more than good old human pride. I thank my father for giving it to me.
"I wonder what they, whoever lives there in that core, will think of him. And I wonder, I suppose, what they will think of us, of the world he comes from. What they will think of this, the Marvel Universe."

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MARVEL